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In the Gates of The North







IN THE GATES OF THE NORTH







"The noble steeds flew along nor needed at all the scourge of the charioteer."

IN THE GATES OF THE NORTH

BY

STANDISH O'GRADY

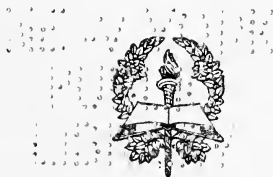
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"THE COMING OF CUCULAIN"

"THE TRIUMPH AND PASSING OF CUCULAIN"

"THE FLIGHT OF THE EAGLE"

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WILLIAM
1881
1882

INTRODUCTION

I KNEW a man who delighted much to express himself with a certain amplitude and stateliness of diction, and rejoiced greatly when his words seemed to strike the ear with a sound like the measured tread of marching men. Once, in his sonorous manner, he wrote some large sentences concerning Irish History in general, of the relations of Irish heroic legend with the same, and of both with our country's still obscure, uncertain, and untravelled future—sentences which I propose to use here by way of preface or prelude to the heroic, romantic, and semi-historic Irish tale which I am about to tell. It is one which, perhaps, if I do not hope too much may be found prophetic as well as commemorative, and to belong as much to the future as to the past.

“ There is,” he writes, “ a pleasure in watching the reclamation of desert land—the choking

moisture drained away, the sour peat mingled with sand, the stones collected into heaps, the making of roads, and the building of fences, and in the end, the sight of cornfields where the snipe shrieked, and herds of kine where the morass quaked.

“ There is a pleasure in watching the dispersion of darkness before the rising sun, the darkness melting slowly into the silver twilight, the twilight ripening gradually into the golden day.

“ There is a pleasure in watching with the scientist the subsidence and concentration of some vast primordial chaos into a shape of celestial beauty, fulfilling its part in some sidereal system, rolling through space around its sun, clear and determinate, a world and a star.

“ But there is a pleasure, deeper, keener, more human, and more sublime, felt by one who contemplates out of the savage and semi-casual collisions of hostile tribes the slow growth of a noble people, the reclamation of a vast human wilderness, seeing how the stormful gloom of mutual ignorance and hatred grows less and less dense, shot through by the rays of knowledge, imagination, and love ; how the chaos of aimless strugglings and half-understood purposes con-

centres gradually into the wise and determined action of a nation fulfilling its part in the great confraternity of the nations of the earth.

“But for the historian of Ireland no such delightful task is reserved ; not for him to trace the courses of the many converging springs and rivulets in the mountains, to mark how they unite, and, uniting, form the strong undivided current of the history of a Nation rolling forward between its firm shores, freighted with the destinies of one people ; not for him to limn the low, glorious growth of a nation, great or small, but a nation. Beginnings, ever still beginnings, noble actions without end, that shine and vanish, characters as great as any, but resultless, movements full of hope leading no-whither, flashing glories ever dimmed and blasted, travail and labour unceasing, expectation and resolution ever baffled ; through all the centuries Ireland labouring to bring forth the Irish Nation, and that nation yet unborn. ‘*Tantæ molis erat Romanam condere Gentem.*’

“Yet, too, how much has been gained, what public crimes and sins avoided, by a birth postponed into a time when, however dimly, the true ideal of nations is beginning to be understood, and their rights and duties to be prescribed in

accordance with the decrees of a conscience, which ceases more and more to be merely National and tends more and more to become Planetary. When Ireland at last emerges, standing out clear on the world's horizon, her conscience will be Irish indeed—that will never fail—but it will be also the conscience of the Earth. None can hate her, none ever will, or can. Because of her own millennium-enduring tragedy she will love this suffering world, and because of her sufferings, her patience, her faith, her hope, and her heroic and unconquerable resolve, the world will love her.

“But,” he continues, “if our history is a disappointment, supplying to the patriot scant material for pride or hope, so are not our legends. In these, when read with sympathy and understanding, the student finds himself in vital union with some unimagined greatness of thought, fulness of feeling, and amplitude of soul, becomes conscious of something that seems to suggest the mighty destiny, the cosmic significance, the daring and indomitable, far-reaching, and far-aspiring spirit of the Gael.

“A nation's history,” he adds, “is made for it to a greater degree than men suspect by the Genius of the Earth, and influences emanating

from a certain irresistible and predestined procession of mundane events ; but their legends they make for themselves. To that dim twilight region, where day and night are as one, the immortal and divine soul, stained and tired by contact with the vulgarity of actual things, returns for rest and recuperation, and there sleeping, projects its dreams against the waning night and before the rising of the sun. The legends give us the imagination of the race, they give us that kind of history which it intends to exhibit, and therefore, whether semi-historical or mythical, are prophetic. They unveil, if obscurely, the ideals and aspirations of the land and race which gave them birth, and so possess a value far beyond that of actual events, and duly recorded deeds. Our heroic literature is bound to repeat itself in action and within the constraining laws of time and space and the physical world. For that prophecy has been always, and will be always fulfilled. The heroes are coming, of that you may be sure ; their advent is as certain as time. Listen well and you may hear them, hear their glad talk and their sounding war songs, and the music and thunder of their motion. The heroes are coming ; they are on the road.

“ Or, if we must consider this our semi-mythical heroic age, from a more mundane and entirely rational point of view, here at least is food for the never-sated, imperious, and domineering imagination. Our history, if elsewhere verifiable, and dead and gray, is here at least full of action, full of passion, full of light, full of colour, full of outline and form, human in every fibre, and instinct with an abounding vitality, individuality, and power. There are ages upon ages in Irish history, Anglo-Irish, Norman-Irish, epochs of the Duv-Gall and Fín-Gall, etc., etc., but none else like that which is least authentic, and yet, in a sense, the most authentic of them all, the Age of the Heroes.

“ Here, if never elsewhere, we are permitted to see majestic shapes of kings and queens, chieftains and brehons, and bards, splendidly attired. How they gleam in the large rich light shed abroad over the triumphant progress of the legendary tale. We see duns, snow-white, with roofs striped crimson and blue, chariots cushioned with noble skins, with bright bronze wheels and silver poles and yokes. The lively-hearted resolute steeds gallop past, bearing the warrior and his charioteer, with the loud clangour of rattling armature, of battle stones, of

spears and darts. As in some bright young dawn, over the dewy grass, and in the light of the rising sun, superhuman in size and beauty, their long yellow hair curling over their shoulders, bound around the neck with torcs of gold, clad in white linen tunics and floating brattas of crimson silk fastened on the breast by huge wheel brooches of gold, their long spears musical with running rings, with naked knees and bare crowns, they cluster round their kings, the chieftains and knights of the heroic age of Ireland.

“ And so it happens that these men of the ages pronounced mythical by the wise, Cuculain, and Læg, and his brothers, and Conall, and Con-cobar, and a score of others, have never suffered death at all, but are very strong and well as I write, yet what millions upon millions within the historical ages are to-day as non-apparent as last year’s snow. And so it comes to pass that Ozymandias, King of Kings, is quite dead, while Cuculain is alive.”

Now this may be all very well for those who, like the writer, have so steeped themselves in the atmosphere of our Irish heroic literature that the very names, uncouth and discordant to others, sound on their ears like music, or shine with a radiance like the stars. But I must warn

those who endeavour to read the ensuing tale, *i.e.*, “ In the Gates of the North,” that even if they afterwards learn to like it—and I know very well that some will—they must be prepared, in the beginning, to read it like a task, and pursue it at least through some initial chapters as if it were a severe mental exercise ; so remote and unusual is the plane of thought and emotion, so unfamiliar the point of view, so strange are the characters and their manners and surroundings, while the very style is so different from that which is in common use to-day. But at the same time I will say that those who instinctively, or by resolute study, learn to like this grand old story of how Cuculain, son of Sualtam, though alone and forsaken, and encompassed by thousands of enemies, held the “ Gates of the North ” against a host of invaders, and, like a true champion and patriot, spent himself—his youth, energy, blood, and young enthusiasm—in defence of his native land and his own otherwise defenceless people—they, I say, who read and like this tale will never like it by halves. They will like it well, and never forget it if they like it at all ; and of how few modern novels, even the most brilliant and most graphic, can this be truly said. I pledge my word that it is so.

Read the story, even at the cost of a little strenuous mental exercise, and take my word for it that this strange tale, though half in and half out of the world, will abide with you to the last day that you live, and will be always regarded by you as a great intellectual treasure stored away in the deep places and guarded recesses of the soul. For it is a great tale, one of the greatest in the whole world.

And I can afford to say this, for the tale, all this is good in it, is not mine, but has come to me as a tradition and legacy of our ancestors, the great singers and narrators of old time. In that tale will be found the story of Cuculain's manhood. Elsewhere I have told the story of his birth, childhood, and boyhood, in a book called "The Coming of Cuculain."

STANDISH O'GRADY.

In the Gates of the North

CHAPTER I

THE PURPOSE OF MEAVE

QUEEN MEAVE summoned to her to Rath-Cruhane all her captains and counsellors and tributary kings. They came at once according as they had been commanded by the word of her mouth. When they were assembled, Meave, from her high throne canopied with shining bronze, addressed them. She was a woman of great stature, beautiful and of a pure complexion, her eyes large and full and blue-grey in colour, her hair dense and long and of a lustrous yellow. A tiara of solid gold encircled her head, and a torque of gold her white neck. Her mantle of scarlet silk, very fine, was gathered over her ample bosom in the ard-regal brooch of the high sovereignty of Connaught. In her

right hand she bore a long spear with a broad blade of shining bronze. Her shield-bearer stood behind the throne. On her right hand stood her husband ; on her left Fergus Mac Roy, captain of her guards. Her voice, as she spoke, was full, clear, and musical, and rang through the vast hall.

“ It is known to you all,” she said, “ that there is not in Banba, nor yet in the whole world, so far report speaks truly, a woman more excellent than myself. I am the best, and the most powerful, and the most famous, and the best-born. My father was the High King of all Ireland, and he had six daughters, myself, and Derbine, and Ethney, Ella, Clohra, and Mugain, a famous brood, and of these I was ever reckoned the best, both by myself and by others. Wherefore my father and the men of Ireland gave me the greatest dowry of all, for a less I would not accept, knowing well what manner of woman I was. I disdained also to mate with a man who was not the best, and that man was Aileel Mor, High King of all Connaught, for he was the richest, and the most war-like, and the most bountiful of all the Kings of Eiriu. Yet even of him I would accept no bridal gift, but I caused him to accept great gifts from myself, so that he

became my man. And when I abandoned my father's house, far-shining Tara, I came westward, driving before me my innumerable herds and flocks, and my trains of cars and pack horses laden with jewels and household stuff, and having in my service, three hundred youths, all captains and the sons of kings, each of them having one hundred men of war under him, so that the force with which I set forth from Tara was thirty thousand men.

“ Before me, as I rode through the plains of Meath, there went nine shining chariots abreast, all red-yew and burning bronze, drawn by splendid horses under yokes of silver with silver bells ringing upon them as they went. Upon my right hand were nine and nine on my left, following one after the other, and nine behind, all abreast, closed the square in the midst of which I rode, lest I should be annoyed by the too near clamour of the host, or my raiment take any mud or dust. And in that manner I came to the great ford of the Shannon, and met my man, and entered Connaught and took the supreme government of the Province.”

“ Thou hast spoken mere truth,” exclaimed the kings and captains and great men. “ This we all know, for some of us have seen it, and

the rest know it from the report of our fathers."

"So that now," she went on, "the fame of my glory has gone abroad into all lands as the best of all women, for of her, the Half-Red Meave of Leinster, I make little account, because her complexion and the colour of her hair are not pleasing to the men of Ireland, and in other respects, too, she is not to be named beside me."

And they said: "Truly, O Meave, the woman is naught."

"I am the best, and I am served by the best, warriors with whom there are none in all Erin to be compared, whether for valour or for loyalty. And though my husband be now somewhat stricken with years, yet the flush of a divine origin makes full my veins, for I am near akin to the high gods of Fail, and time has not touched me, for my beauty is unimpaired, and still as of yore I go joyfully to the red feasts of Ned, and waste the ranks of opposing battalions and break the battle upon my foes, for I have ever scorned the works of women, and my delight was always in government and in war, so that of the six mighty sons whom I have borne to Aileel, there is none my equal, whether to rule over men, or to

order the things which relate to war. And now in all Ireland there is but one province which is not obedient to me, for all the kings of Meath and Leinster and Munster are either tributary to me, or have accepted my gifts and become my men, so that all without exception, save only the Ultonians, keep my peace and follow my war, and the whole world accounts me happy, and the happiest."

"Surely, O Meave," they said, "thou art happy, and the happiest."

"Not so," she said, "for ever I have wanted some one thing, lacking which I came short of supreme felicity, and now and for a long time past the thought of that one hard-hearted and stubborn province which will not obey me or yield me reverence like the rest, has been very disquieting to my mind. There, only, divisions and disruptions are not known which might avail me for its overthrow, for all the kings and captains and great men hold the province firm under the authority of one man, Concobar Mac Nessa, son of Factna the Righteous, Captain of the Red Branch, and High King of all Ulla. As when a founder casts many pieces of metal into the furnace and they come forth one strong and shining bar, so is this province under the

Red Branch and under Concoibar. Truly the Ultonians have never regarded me, and of late I have sustained at their hands a most grievous indignity. For recently having heard that one of their kings, Dara, king of South Coolney, was the possessor of a bull, jet-black, and of incomparable size and beauty, I sent to him Fergus Mac Roy, captain of my guard, for the bull ; and at first Dara consented, for he could not, he said, refuse anything to a woman, much less to a woman like myself ; but afterwards, when one of my young men boastingly said that it was well the bull had been surrendered so freely, for that otherwise he would have been taken away by force, the churl repented ; he drew up his bridges, barred his gates, and manned his ramparts, conducting himself, he and his people, in a very churlish and unworthy fashion.

“ Now, it is not customary with me to submit tamely to any indignity. Therefore I propose to lead my army into Ulster, and at the same time take to myself that jewel and overthrow and destroy the Red Branch on the same road, and reduce the whole province into subjection to myself. One woman only, according to the traditions of bards and historians, has hitherto

exercised the supreme sovereignty of Ireland—Macha, the Red-Haired, namely, the strong daughter of Æd Roe. I, too, I have sworn it, will rule Ireland in all her coasts, so that the white-bordered blue-green mantle of the boundless Lir only shall be the limit of my dominion, and I shall surpass in glory and renown, as in other attributes, even that illustrious heroine. Then only may I be truly happy and attain to supreme felicity.

“ And now I have summoned you, my kings and captains and chief counsellors, to debate before me whether I had better lead against the Ultonians my own unconquerable host, even the army of Connaught, or draw to me also the risings-out and warlike array who are obedient to my commands, and will follow me rejoicing to the war.”

CHAPTER II

THE HOSTING

THEREUPON some were of opinion that as there was nothing greater than glory and honour, the Olnemacta alone should invade the Red Branch and wrest from them the dominion of the North, for that no glory would result from the conquest of one province by four. Others, a few, exclaimed against this opinion as folly, and declared that their great Queen, after having subdued the rest of Ireland by much warlike toil, should now enjoy her profit of the same and lead into the North the rising-out of the Four Provinces, and that as for glory and honour, they were ever wont to follow victory and power as effulgence and splendour and wide-ranging day followed the sun in his journeying. Then the Queen signified to Fergus Mac Roy that he should declare his opinion. When Fergus sent forth his great voice no other sound was audible. At first his voice was low, his words slow and deliberate,

and his aspect grave and awful, but anon his voice rolled forth from his throat and mighty chest like brattling thunder, and his words became a torrent of sounding speech. His face was great and massive and his air majestic. Warrior eyes blue and bright blazed there under strong-ridged brows. He wore the crommeal only. His bratta was large and ample, dark green, bordered with gold ; his yellow hair fell upon his wide shoulders. On his breast he wore a wheel-brooch of findrinny, bronze such as no artificer had poured forth for a thousand years. His lena beneath the dark green mantle was of fine wool, white as the foam of the sea, and girt at the waist with a broad belt of corded bronze. His shoes were plated with red bronze, and his battle-cap barred with the same. All his attire was plain but magnificent. He was the greatest and comeliest man in the province ; in his heart there was no guile. He never looked askance, but ever turned his massive front and great eyes full on the man or woman whom he addressed. — In his left hand he held a round shield without device, in his right a huge spear, polished in the haft, glittering in the ample blade. Such to outward view was Fergus Mac Roy, son of the Red Rossa, ex-King of all

Ulla. He stepped forward three paces into the assembly and spoke.

“ It is known to me,” he said, “ while it is not known to you, what manner of men are the Red Branch of the Ultonians. But it is very well known to you, and to some of you to your sorrow, what manner of man I am and what the three thousand champions whom I command—ex-Ultonians all. And who better than I can declare to you the battle prowess and the nigh invincible might of the matchless warriors of the North, for I was once Captain of the Red Branch and High King of all the Ultonians till the rhymers and historians and cunning lawyers drove me from my high seat, for I could not endure their stale and bygone wisdom, nor understand it, and I was succeeded by Concobar Mac Nessa, who is their King to-day. Then I rebelled against Concobar, for I was very wroth on account of the slaying of the sons of Usna while they were under my protection ; and of the Red Branch I drew after me seven times three thousand, and amongst them that torch of war and chivalry, Cormac Conlingas, and Cormac Duvlingas, equal in fight to a battalion, and that bursting cloud of disruption and devastation, called the Chaffer of the Ultonians, Duvac

Dael Ulla, and what those men are you can see with your eyes, for they are before you, as I myself am. Being such and so mightily reinforced and sustained, I went into rebellion, yet you behold me now an exile with these mighty men, all that is left of my host, my ever-dear and faithful comrades whom the green plains of Ulla now conceal. O my sorrow, for I cannot forget them, so kind and loving, matchless in war, yet contrary to every expectation, overthrown in battle after battle, thirteen in all. And I say this, and it is my last word, if you, the Olnemacta only, march against Concoibar and the Red Branch, you shall not have me and my exiles for helpers, for we shall go southwards seeking new settlements across the great river and make swordland of North Munster."

That speech and that menace made the weaker opinion the stronger, and it was resolved by the High Queen and her Saba that night that messengers should be sent on all sides to summon the men of Ireland for the invasion of Ulster.

Now, from Irrus to Garman—from the borders of the Crave Rue to the Island Height of Nemed, there was a stirring and commotion as when the summer winds shakes the forest with its leaves. Then out of every rath green-sided

and fossed, and from every strong stone-built cathair and many a lake-surrounded crannogue and far-shining liss or dun in the reedy marshes, and many a forestine stronghold, and many a cliff-surmounting fortress whence men beheld the sun sink red into the sea, came forth the warlike children of Milith with their weapons and bravery, their horses and scythed chariots, obedient to the voice of their mistress, the man-ruling Queen of the Olnemacta :—came the children of Heber from the south, and of Here-mon from the great central plains ; the Ossorians from their pleasant country between the Suir and the boiling Barrow, watched over for ever, east and west, by Black Stairs and Slievenaman, the Clan Dega, the descendants of Donn of the Sand Mounds, and of Colpa, the swordsman, where between green banks the Boyne pours into the Ictian Sea ; also, wherever they had lands, the remanant of the ancient Firbolgs, came the Ithians of the south-west, the Ernai and all the noble Lagenians, sons of Cathair More, the mighty and red-speared Cathair, and the Gaulish kings who had made swordland in their midst. By tens and twenties and hundreds they came forth, bright rivulets of valour and bravery coalescing into one mighty stream on the

great road which ran westward from Tara, rolling on to Rath-Cruhane, where Meave and the host of Connaught awaited them. On the high watch-tower sat Queen Meave with Fergus beside her, and she taught him concerning every nation and tribe and clan, and concerning their captains and mighty men, distinguishing all by their banners and fluttering mantles—blue, green, purple, brown, scarlet, or crimson, and according to the blendings and diversities of the same, or by their weapons and mode of bearing them, or the shape and colour of their chariots, distinguishing them far away, for she was keen of sight as the eagle, and her heart swelled with pride as she saw them, how they came in their multitudes between the green woods and over the hills and droums and the grassy billows of the land. And she related to Fergus her many wars and the battles which she had broken upon the men of Erin, nation by nation, till she had subdued them.

“ My march into the North,” she said, “ leading this mighty host, will be the rushing of a spring tide and the evacuation of territories.”

CHAPTER III

THE PROPHET OF MOY TURA

FERGUS held his peace, but he noted all her words and scanned narrowly the hosts of the men of Erin as they came. They, on their side, when they saw their great Queen, her shield, and upright spear, shouted so mightily that the hollows of the forests and the distant mountains sent back a deep reverberation, and the solid canopy of the firmament resounded. And now the Four Plains of Ai, which were mensal lands of Rath-Cruhane, and had never at any time been wounded by the plough or defaced by spade and mattock, namely, Moa and Markine, Sleshin and Keeltane, were filled with the uproar of the warriors, the whinnying and neighing of steeds, and the sound of the revolution of brazen wheels. The sheen and far-seen glittering what mouth of man could describe, for never before was there witnessed in Eiriu a hosting like this ;

such were the number of the warriors and their splendour ?

Nevertheless, in the night's silence, and in the awful nocturnal solitudes when most of all the soul is apt to be fearful, Meave was troubled in her mind when she thought of Fergus and his exiles, and recalled his words how they were a remnant, and as she thought of the great prowess of the Red Branch, and how the province was bound together, firm and strong, beneath its king. Therefore, while the Kings of Olnemacia and her foreign confederates were still encamped together on the Four Plains of Ai, Queen Meave set forth to go to Moy tura, to consult with the prophet who dwelt there, and she left Aileel sitting in the door of the dun, looking forth with dim eyes, and his heart was warmed when he heard the martial din around him, and she left Fergus moving about among the battalions upon the plain, distinguishable from afar, and Cormac Conlinglas directing the evolutions of a squadron of swift chariots.

At a place where the inhabited country meared with a wilderness she dismissed her guard of chariots and horsemen, and went forward alone ; only her son Maine, surnamed " Mother's Darling," went with her as charioteer. He was

slender and graceful, but very strong and active. A cape of green fastened by a silver brooch fluttered from his shoulders ; his temples and hair were girt with a ribbon of twisted thread of gold. There was a goad in his hand shod with red bronze. So through the wilderness they rode alone, and the sun set and darkness increased, and behind them full and round rose the white moon. The wind blew cold over those waste solitudes, and Meave gathered the mantle around her and drew the ample hood over her head.

The man whom Meave went to consult on this occasion was not one of the known and honoured druids of the province, but one who held commerce with forgotten powers and dread unworshipped sovereignties of old Fomorian principalities shorn of all glory and might by the younger gods of the Gael.

They came to Moy Tura—the Plain of Towers. It was a vast cemetery, long unused, a wide-lying place of tombs, of broad-based pointed tumuli, great mounds, barrows, and cairns ; of cromlechs and tall sepulchral stones, ogham-inscribed. Here the mighty of ancient times had been interred, potent sorcerers and sorceresses, famous druids, giants, and champions,

Firbolgs and Fomorians of dim nigh-forgotten days and the beginnings of time, and Meave shuddered when she saw the stones how they gleamed white and fierce like the fangs of wolves bared and staring in the ghastly moonshine, and felt around her the presence of the countless hosts of the dead.

Here amongst the tombs far from the ruddy cheerful life and ways of men dwelt the prophet of Moy Tura, dusky-pallid, grey and lean, misshapen, with eyes bright and wild, deep-seen in wizard mysteries, the companion of phantoms—perchance their sport. No Ard-druidic splendour of glittering raiment was his, or breast-plate of findrinny from which flashed the likeness of the rising sun, or jewel-bespangled turban, or beplumed mantle myriad-hued, gold-hemmed, gold-fringed ; for he was clothed in black, and the dun in which he dwelled was built around the entrance and gave upon the interior of a tomb.

The prophet was not taken by surprise on this occasion for he was well aware of the High Queen's coming. He did not stir from his place to meet her, but Meave came to him, humbly, and in the dim light bent low before him as to a god, so that the heart of the wizard man was touched and his lonely pride appeased.

“What wouldst thou, my daughter?” he said.

“A prosperous vaticination and favourable foretelling concerning the issue of a mighty labour which has come upon me, for I lead the joined host of the Four Provinces against the Red Branch and much I fear the might of these stern champions of the North.”

“I know it,” answered the prophet. “Rejoice and be happy, my daughter, for weak as a woman in child-bed are the peerless warriors of Clanna Rury, even the Knights of the Red Branch, great their fame. For the curse has fallen upon them, which long since Macha pronounced when unwittingly Concobbar raced his steeds at Tailtean against the pregnant woman, and that woman, unknown to all, no other than Macha, the Red-Maned, daughter of Æd Roe. I have seen her alight like a fiery bird upon the topmost crag of Slieve-an-Ullar above the cold currents of the Moyle. Storm-clouds were rolled around her and red lightnings played. There standing, she reached the likeness of a spear over the sea against the Fomorian Isle of Towers, and summoned to her her host of druid-thralls, and subject genii, and obedient baleful influences, submarine, sub-

terrene, and from the deeps they arose with a noise, invisible, clothed in white mist, and the mist is over all Ulla. There the hearts of the mighty are molten, and the understandings of the wise disordered, and nameless terrors possess heroic souls. Concobar is under fear in Emain Macha, and Laegairey in Dun-Lagra, and Conall-Carna in Carn-Fion, and Celtcar in Dun-Celtcar, and thou hast nought to dread from the Ultonians."

"I, too," said Meave, "was present, and assisting at those memorable games, and it was I, and no other, who urged such a course upon the youths of the Ultonians; for at the time I was spoken of with their young King, even Concobar Mac Nessa, and I thought that my pre-eminence and glory in that great hosting of the men of Erin were minished by the boasting of the woman's husband, who said, first privately, and then, in wrath, before us all, that his wife could easily outstrip the great steeds of Concobar, and bring them to swift shame, though now upon their foreheads bells of victory rang out triumphing peals. For the pride and vain-glory, and arrogance and haughtiness of the young Ultonians was very displeasing to the man's mind. And he said that but for the pregnancy of the woman she would make good

that word of her dear husband, however inadvertently spoken and contrary to what was right.

“ Afterwards I was witness of that unusual race—the woman against the horses, and beheld the mightiest of the Ultonians, how with difficulty they held back and bore down the man. Also I heard the shouting of the countless host, and, through all, the rapid heart-palpitations and the moanings of the woman as she ran—outspeeding the horses—and saw her how she stumbled and fell prone within the goal ; nor did I feel even a little pity for her on that occasion. Thereafter there was a shrieking, which divided Earth and Heaven, as with swords, and then silence, and after the silence words in a strange tongue ! and none knew the meaning of the words, save the wise men of the Ultonians only, and they have not revealed it.”

“ And for a time there were rumours and babblings, and overmuch empty conjecturing and interpreting ; but all is now forgotten save by me and by thee, and, mayhap, by some of the wizards of the Ultonians who still live.”

“ Here, sitting, I heard all,” murmured the Prophet, “ I heard all and understood.”

“ Afterwards there was a storm, the like of

which is not remembered by the most ancient, and a divine terror seized the host, so that men and women, we fled out of that assembly in panic and wild disorder, each unto his own territory, and to the sheltering arms of our walled duns and raths and the rosy comfortings of our hearths, so dear and familiar ; for like the ruining and breaking up of worlds were the portents manifested that day at Tailteen.

“ I, myself,” said Meave, “ was the first to flee, for my heart is womanly, altogether, and before thee, O Mighty Prophet and True Seer, I would wear no false shows, such as those with which I deceive the men of Erin, and subdue them to my will.”

“ And are thy prophesyings certain—sure, and to be cherished and relied upon at all times, O Mightiest of the Mighty, Dread Seer, and Prophet of the Olnemacta ? ”

“ They are,” he answered. “ Great felicity and supreme dominion to thee, my daughter. And now I would be alone.”

Rejoicing, Meave made her escape from the druidic cave, and Maine Matrimail let loose the steeds and they flew wildly between the tombs half-white, half-black, in the staring moonshine, and between the tall shadow casting stones. As

they went Meave heard a singing sweet, and clear, a strange song, a fairy singing, and was aware that a maiden sat at her feet in the chariot and, as she sang, unrolled a druid web, half seen through rolling vapour.

Fair and sweet was the maid, her blood showed pink in the tender nails of her delicate white hands.

“Who art thou?” said the Queen.

“Faithleen, the druidess,” she answered. “From the fairy hills of the Boyne have I now come. I keep watch and ward for thee for ever.”

“What is in the web?” said the Queen. “It is alive and roars thunderously. It is full of the motion and noise of men and horses, but I see nothing clearly through the fairy mist.”

“It is the web of Time,” she replied. “Out of the loom it rolls where the blind old man weaves always, who is himself the shuttle of unknown and nameless powers.”

“I lead the men of the Four Provinces against the Ultonians,” cried Meave. “What is the appearance of my host in the web? Tell me true, O Faithleen, the prophetess.”

“Black with disaster; pale with consternation; bloodied all and crimson.”

“Thou liest, O Faithleen, the prophetess. Concobar is under fear in Emain Macha, and the Red Branch are strengthless as the pale shades of the dead, and I dread nothing from the Ultonians. Look thou to the North and bear true witness.”

“I lie not, O my Queen, nor doth the web lie. Truly Concobar is under fear in Emain Macha, and the Red Branch are strengthless as the pale shades of the dead. Yet thy host is as I say.”

“Look now well. How appear my host, O Danaan ? ”

“Bloodied all and crimson.”

“Thou liest, O immortal : Concobar is under fear in Emain Macha, and Laegairey in Dun-Lagra, and Conall in Carn-Foin, and Celtcar in Dun-Celtcar. Weaker than child-bearing women when their pains mightily seize hold upon them are the descendants of Rury, and I fear nothing from the Ultonians. How showeth my host to thee now, O Faithleen of the fairy hills ? ”

“Bloodied all and crimson, and the clouds roll across the web and it is not seen.”

“Sawest thou aught my son, Maine Matri-mail ? ” said Meave. “Heardest thou aught ? ”

“ I saw nothing ; heard nothing. Only the gleaming of the stones frightened my horses, so that with difficulty and at the price of sore hands have I been able to restrain them in their plungings.”

They met the Royal guard after that and went on to Magh Ai through the night and the gloaming till the sun rose red from his red-flaming couch.

When the host of the Tan beheld her coming they shouted mightily, whereat Meave stood erect in her chariot. Her gold cath-barr was on her head, in her right hand her spear, before her bosom her shield, and above her shield, beautiful beyond words, her countenance serene and high. In this manner down streets of spears held in the hands of kneeling warriors she journeyed slowly through the host, moving on to Rath-Cruhane.

Now, Fergus Mac Roy was moving through the whole host, marshalling and directing, conspicuous among the warriors as an antlered deer that stalks amid the herd, and his voice resounded above the din and clamour of Magh Ai. But when the royal cavalcade appeared from the North, and the whole host was confused, he bore

it with difficulty, and turned half round, and leaning on his spear, looked askance and slightly to where the great Queen stood erect in the midst of the high chariot-guard. When she saw Fergus, her serene countenance was disturbed, and she sat down quickly, and bid them draw to the covering of the chariot and urge the steeds onward to the Royal Dun. There Aileel sat in the doorway, and Orloff, their youngest son, sat by his side preparing a scourge for his steeds. Aileel chid his wife ; she answered softly, and went into the dun.

CHAPTER IV

ONLY A MAN

NEXT day Queen Meave rode through the ample gates of three times walled Rath-Cruhane, her face towards the Shannon, and set in motion the mighty host of the Tan. Far and wide over the Four Plains the war standards of the nations glowed in the fiery light of the kindling dawn. All promised themselves that on this road they would kill, banish, despoil, and utterly overthrow the Ultonians. Any man observing that host from afar would have seen first the Queen and, for a long time, no other, such were her stature and beauty, and high imperial mien, such the splendour and size of her horses and chariot, the shining of her apparel, white, crimson, and gold, the glitter of her broad shield, the flashing of the gem-set cath-barr above her wide brows, and the brazen-beaming blade of her great spear, like a flame. Her husband sat beside her, rejoicing in her glory. Before and

after and on either side went her chariot-guard, and all around, as far as the eye might see, in a shining tide, wave after glittering wave, flowed forward the countless armies of the Tan, according to their tribes and nations. The twin sons of Nera led the van, riding in one chariot.

In that order they crossed the green plains of Connaught, and forded the Shannon at the Ford of Lon, and traversed Teffia and passed the great lakes of Meath, rich in grass, holding their straight road prosperously towards Ulster, as men draw to the nest of a dragon sick to death.

They passed the tall tomb of Essa and the great terraced cairn of Odba, wife of steed-loving Heremon, and drew nigh to the mearings of the Red Branch. They were amazed that they came not anywhere upon traces of outposts, or sentinels, or scouting parties, out of the North ; and well indeed might they be surprised at that, for the hosting of the Four Provinces to Rath-Cruhanne was not a thing done in a corner. Always the sons of Nera went in the van.

On the fifth day these last found a pillar stone, and around its waist an oak sapling bent into a hoop, and on the sapling an Ogham newly cut. Also they saw that horses and two chariots

had been there in the night, and that of the twain one had gone thence to the South in the morning, and the other to the North. All around the grass was closely cropped by the horses who grazed there during the night. Admiring what all this might mean, they took the hoop with them, withholding it during the day, and in the evening, when the camp was pitched, they brought it with them to the Council. Many voices were raised there as they drew nigh, that of Fergus clamorous and clangorous over all, distinguishable in the ends of the camp. The Seneschal called their names with a clear voice, and, drawing aside the curtains, bade them pass into the assembly.

Aileel, High King of the Olnemacta, sat at the head of the pavilion, nodding, while the silver wand trembled in his hand, and the Queen sat upon his right hand, and Fergus stood upon his left, wrangling with the assembled kings: and the Queen was incensed at the authority with which he spake. When she saw the sons of Nera she smiled and beckoned them to her, for they had been brought up with her own sons, and were, moreover, comely, and she took the hoop from their hands and gave it to the Ard-Druid to read, but he could not. Then it was

handed to Fergus, and with difficulty they persuaded him to look into the Ogham, for the kings desired one thing and he another, and Meave supported them, and he was enraged with her and them. When he read the Ogham he started and was silent. He looked at it for a long time, and then asked the sons of Nera how they came by the hoop, and they told him.

“What is it?” said Meave.

“It is an Ogham taught by Cathvah to the youths of the Ultonians,” replied Fergus.

“What is in the hoop?” said Meave.

“A warning, O Queen, and a challenge of chivalry, a magnanimous warning, addressed to the Four Princes and to thee.”

“Who is the one who would dare to address warning and challenge to the joined host that I lead into the North?” cried the Queen.

“‘Cuculain,’” said Fergus, “is the name that is in the hoop.” He was strangely silent now, so that Meave had to repeat her questions.

“Braggart and over-daring have ever been the champions of the North,” replied the Queen.

“Who is the man?”

“A certain gentle youth of the Ultonians,” answered Fergus. “Sons of Nera, you will go cautiously from this day forward.”

“ We are the ears and eyes of the Tan,” they said. “ We shall not change our manner of going for one man. The van is ours.”

“ You will come to some hurt,” said Fergus.

That night a great wave of tenderest love and affection for all his ancient comrades and dear friends of the Red Branch came over the mind of Fergus, and especially for his own pupil and fosterling, the son of Sualtam. All the night he sat on his bed’s edge, swaying to and fro, with his great man-slaying hands before his eyes, through which the hot tears gushed like rivers, and with difficulty did he restrain himself from lifting up his voice in a terrible and far-heard lamentation.

While he so sat, weeping, Cormac Conlingas, son of Concobar Mac Nessa, stood silent beside him, with his right hand resting on the left shoulder of his captain. That Cormac was the handsomest man in all the host of Meave, and in all feasts his was ever the merriest and most alluring countenance, and his tongue was ever the most forward and mirth-provoking.

That night there was a great snow, at which men marvelled, for the snowing time of the year was long past. Next day Fergus and his exiles took the van, displacing the sons of Nera, and

Fergus that day led the army in a great circuit through woods and plains in the snow and returned the whole Tan to the camping ground of the previous night, and that place Cuil Silinna, hard by the Boyne. There was great wrath amongst the kings that night, who declared that Fergus should never again hold any high authority or command in the great hosting of the Four Provinces.

“The snow effaced all landmarks,” said Cormac Conlingas, who as he spoke looked at the High Queen and smiled. He was a youth who might say and do all that to which his mind might prompt him, such was he in face and form, for very great was Queen Meave’s desire towards handsome men.

“It was not the snow,” replied Meave, “but treachery and faithlessness and great love for the Ultonians.”

Fergus said never a word.

Although no rain fell that night, yet in the morning no wisp or swathe or shining star of snow could be seen anywhere; only the dewy green grass and the flowers, with birds singing. Then the sun sprang forth red from his red-flaming couch and flooded the world with his light. Nevertheless, from that night forward

all things seemed strange, wild, unreal, and pregnant with omens and portents always to the men of Meave, and they ever looked to see unusual happenings and dire and unexpected events. It was as if they had that night overpassed a mearing by which worlds were divided. No man spake of these things even to his fellow or comrade, but all men were aware.

Presently, the sons of Nera, who still held the van, came upon the track of a chariot going on before them. "It is the same," they said, "and the horses the same—which went southwards out of that close-cropped glade."

They followed the track till they came to a shorn fir tree standing upright between the two wheel tracks of the chariot. Wondering what this might mean they delayed in that place till Fergus and Meave and the Captains came up with them. "It is a second warning and challenge of chivalry to us," said Fergus, "and an attestation of his prowess, from the youth who goes before us. The tree was flung from him behind as he turned round in the travelling chariot. Can any draw it?" They could not. Fergus withdrew it and showed how the tree had been cut with a single sword-stroke and how two-thirds of the same had been fixed in the

ground by the force and adroitness of that one cast. "Nay, O Fergus," said the sons of Nera, "it was driven in with blows and the marks of the same upon the tree's top afterwards stroken away. The man is not on earth who could do the feat."

"Deceits and pretences are not customary among Ultonians," said Fergus, "greater surprises than this await you; and, O Sons of Nera, while you live you will not be the better for the making of that speech and the thinking of that thought." He looked fixedly at them and said:—"Already you are dead men." Afterwards Fergus discovered Orloff, the Queen's youngest son, amongst the van of the army in his gilded chariot shouting challenges to him who preceded the host, and while he danced along the chariot pole, brandishing his light spears. Fergus bade him go back to his mother and when he would not, drove him back with blows. He returned weeping to the Queen, his mother, and she was incensed.

That night a vast rumour diffused itself through the host concerning Cuculain. In the Council there was dissension and the voice of Fergus might be heard in the ends of the camp as he contended with the kings of the four

Provinces. For Fergus desired that the great warriors of the host should form the van, and the kings derided him. But when the Council was dismissed, Fergus remained with the Queen in the pavilion. She sat defiant and wrathful with averted head. Fergus came before her and seized her resisting hand and said :—

“ Fitter were it for thee, O Queen, to have remained in thy own dun and seen to the government of thy household, than to march upon this foray with thy lord, silly from age, and thy son Orloff, silly from youth. At home in thy own palace thou shouldst have remained with these, but here thou art a disturbing influence, and partest from me the authority over the loose array of this great host. For thou art not thyself fit to govern men, and make provisions to secure victory, or to give the necessary commands in battle ; and against me, who am, thou dost countenance the headstrong and mutinous kings. And this thou, too, thyself well knowest, but it is a delight to thee to appear before all the people with thy weapons and martial bravery, and to hear them shout when they see thee shield-bearing in thy great war-chariot, and thy head gold-crowned above the host. For it is because of this, and not for

thy knowledge of war and government, that the under-kings have not long since put Sibel More aside and raised the Tanist to the Ard-Rieship of the Province ; for with thy fair face, and thy stature beyond women, and thy shining shield, thou hast bewitched them, and also the far-coming kings of the East and of the South. For if thou hast sometimes in the edge of battle cast thy spear into the hostile ranks, well knowedst thou that thy chariot was thick-ringed with warriors, the mightiest in the land, not one of whom would not die a thousand deaths rather than that one tress of thy yellow hair should receive any hurt. And no such great accomplishment is this of thine, for many a time in warlike forays have I seen women contend with spear and shield against opposing warriors and with more cunning and ferocity than have been granted to thee. And this I tell thee, for thy greater behoof. Like an eagle that hovers above the moor-fowl on the mountain-side, there hovers one above this host who delays his stroke, but will quickly deal out death. Far-shooting Cuculain, the son of Sualtam goes before us, his sling is in his hand, and no stronger than the leaf of the sycamore will thy shield be against his sling-balls, and well I know he will not err if against

thee he bends the Crave Tamal, his bending branch. Verily in Emain Macha have I seen him smile far aloft the wheeling swallow. Therefore, now, be persuaded by me, O Queen, and return with thy lord and with the boy. For greatly I fear for thee when I see thee amid the host with the gold cath-barr upon thy head, thy shield far seen, and thy god-like stature, and with difficulty do I draw away my mind to the care of this great host."

"Wherefore, now, O my Queen, be persuaded by me ; return to Rath Cruhane with thy husband and Orloff, and thy sweet daughter, Findabar of the Beautiful Eyebrows. What doth she in this host, save as a lure by which thou drawest to thee the Kings of the Four Provinces ?

"Return to Rath Cruhane, and forget all the pride and ambition and vain-glory, and let men have the government of the Tain."

Now ere Fergus had uttered many words the High Queen arose from where she sat, her fair, pure countenance marred with great anger, and with trembling hands seized a javelin, and cast it at Fergus, but he watched, and stepped aside, and the javelin hissed through the wattled walls, and passed out into the camp ; and ere she could

seize another, he ran to her and took hold of her with his hands and forced her back into her throne, and held her still, and she spat at him. But he took up his speech where she had interrupted him and went on to the end, and when he had made an end he gathered together the weapons that were at her side, and went out of the pavilion stalking moodily to his own booth.

Now outside the royal pavilion there was a throng of men, and amongst them a warrior slain, for a javelin had pierced him behind the ear. Eocha Glunduff was his name, and he was a Rig-Damna of the province of Lahan.

When they drew out the javelin they knew it was the High Queen's, and there was great wrath. Fergus set a guard about the Queen's pavilion that no one should tell her of the death of Eocha Glunduff until the morning.

All that night the great queen raged in her tent, nourishing the angry fire, weeping and gnashing with her teeth ; but as the darkness began to abate she slept. Not long sleeping she was awakened by a cry, and, fearing an assault, she fitted her cath-barr to her head, for it was upon a nail beside the couch, and, looking forth through the window, she saw the warriors gathering together, and men rushing from all

sides out of their branchy booths, looking eastwards, and the sun had not yet risen. So Meave looked too, and lo! a chariot approaching from the east, with horses galloping wildly, all a-wry, as though they had seen a spectre, their heads bare of trappings, and she recognised the horses of the sons of Nera, and behind them in the chariot were two figures headless, lolling against one another, as the chariot leaped and fell, for Cuculain had met them in the forest, and fought with them, and cut off their heads. And he took the bits from the mouths of the horses, and the head-stalls from their heads. With the reins he made fast and secure those brothers in their chariot, and turned the faces of the steeds towards the camp, and scourged them. Madly then they flew.

Alone upon a cairn's top, clear seen against the eastern sky, stood Sualtam's son, the fosterling and pupil of Fergus, bright and shining in his young glory, and behind him the unrisen sun. On high against the Four Provinces he shook the heads of the sons of Nera, held by their long yellow hair, and shouted the battle cry of the Ultonians, cheerful as the note of the hunter's bugle in the dewy morning ; and he sang a clear

song of challenge and defiance against them, and mocked and disparaged and derided them, and laughed, rejoicing in his youth and strength, his agility, and his bravery.

When Queen Meave became aware whose were the galloping steeds, and saw the headless figures streaming with blood, she screamed such a cry as a widow cries when they bring back her husband slain, for she looks up from happy household labours, and lo, the faces of them that bear her man dead are in the doorway. So screamed the great Queen, and thinly clad, and regardless of her dignity she rushed from the tent, and Fergus saw her, and bade one bring out her robe, but as she ran she heard the war-cry of the Ultonians, and lo ! far away, a warrior stood upon a cairn, shaking in his hands two heads, held by the long yellow hair. When he saw her the young Ultonian dropped the heads and bent his sling.

“ Fear not, O Meave,” he cried, “ I shall not hurt thee,” and he slang.

Straightway the gold cath-barr fell from Meave’s head smitten by a swift sling bolt. For the lad could hit a hair and fell the martin in his angled rapid coursings. Again he shouted the Ultonian battle-cry, clearer than a clarion, and

he made a certain boyish gesture at the great army of the Tain, and sprang from the cairn, and was not seen.

A thousand warriors ran forward, but they could not find the youth, nor yet the traces of his light feet, though the trackers of the Tain wearied themselves with searching round and about the cairn.

The man interred in that cairn was Cron-Cu, son of Adnoman, son of Tath, son of Eogamain, son of Beogamain. He was the man who was held down with difficulty by the mightiest of the Ultonians. And his spirit was aware of all ; and he rejoiced greatly in the prowess, skill, and bravery of the young Ultonian.

While they were still stooping and searching they heard a shrill cry towards the north and lo ! Orloff, the Queen's youngest son, rolling head-long out of his chariot, while the reins fell from his relaxed hands, and the steeds still galloped.

After he had slain the sons of Nera, and uttered his challenge to the men of Meave, Cuculain running westwards through the forest, and breaking through into a certain glade came on Orloff whose horses stood near him, harnessed to the light, splendid racing chariot, while he himself kneeling down, with his car-

penters' tools beside him, was smoothing an ash bough to be a wheel-spoke for his chariot.

Then, hearing the noise, he looked up, and saw Cuculain standing above him, stained with the blood of the sons of Nera, and Orloff rose up trembling, and said :—

“ Surely thou art that Sualtam's son, of whom the warriors endlessly converse, and now having met thee, I must die.”

Cuculain laughed, and said, “ Not so, O youth, but thou shalt be my captive. Follow me now quickly and I shall not hurt thee, nor will I bind thee, for I think that thou art a king's son.”

Now Orloff, pretending to follow, presently turned and fled to his chariot, and bounded over the rim of the same, snatching the goad from its place, and turned the horses' heads to the camp. But Cuculain pursued him, and overtook him as he was emerging upon the grassy plain, and in sight of the camp, he drove his spear through the back of Orloff, piercing the crimson fuan, and it came out above the brooch upon his breast, and he rolled forward out of the chariot upon his head. Cuculain recovered his spear, and was not any more seen by the men of Meave.

CHAPTER V

THE SLINGER

SAID Emer to Cuculain one day :—" There are great troubles forward whose nature I cannot foresee, as at other times, for my prophetic gift is gone from me. Go to Feidelm, of beauty never fading, who may instruct thee when I cannot, the wife of Laegairey of the Victories, and deep-seen in all the lore that has to do with the coming times."

Cuculain then made an appointment with Feidelm for a certain day. On the morning next before that day Emer said to him :—" Go not."

" I gave a clear promise," he answered, " and made a certain appointment."

" There are great troubles forward, very great troubles," she answered. " Things evil and to thee malign are abroad ; but my mind is confused, and the seeing power gone from me."

Cuculain answered her affectionately, but

lightly, for he made nothing of the omens.

Then Emer, brave amid her tears, stored his chariot with provant and things needful for a long journey.

In the beautiful dawn he drave forth out of Dun-Dalgan, alone, save for the companionship of his blackbirds. On the rim of the chariot they sat and fluted melodiously. Presently he was aware of the sound of wheels and horses' hoofs behind him, and looking back, saw Sualtam, his father, following in haste. As a child loves to be with an elder brother, so ever Sualtam desired the companionship of his son. Cuculain slackened his pace till his father came up with him. So they rode on together, and crossed the mearing of the province. Looking back Cuculain saw the Druidic mist how it covered the province like a fleece, and he marvelled what that might mean.

In the evening they came to a glade and camped there. Sualtam desired to wait on his son ; Cuculain would not permit him, but waited on his father. Also he tethered and grazed Sualtam's horses in that part of the glade which was filled with rich grass, and his own in that part of it where the grass was thin. This was the glade which the sons of Nera found so

closely cropped. Early next day, in the still morning, he awoke and heard, as it were, the clamour of a mighty host. He climbed into the branches of a lofty beech-tree, and far-away, saw the standard of Queen Meave, and the banners of the sons of Heber and Ith, and the standard of Tara, and of the children of Leairy Lorc, and the whole host already in motion with their faces to the North.

Cuculain thereupon made great haste and came down, swinging rapidly from branch to branch like a wood-cat, his scarlet bratta flashing amid the green leaves, and awoke his father, and bade him to urge his steeds swiftly northward to Ath-na-Forarey, and Emain Macha, and to arouse the Red Branch far and wide, for that the Four Provinces of Erin were gathered together for the devastation of Ulla. Sualtam made haste and scourged his steeds, and they flew northward, but Cuculain held on upon his straight course to the South.

Nevertheless the prophetess was dumb on this occasion, or spoke wild and sounding words void of meaning. She was an Ultonian, and on the noble women of the Red Branch, too, the curse had fallen, for what enchantment can possess men if women be immune from the same, and

keep good watch and ward, who are themselves potent above all and matchless whether to cure men's souls or make them sick.

Cuculain departed from Tara enraged at his fool's errand. He noted the emptiness of Tara as he came and as he went, and galloped his horses till he came on the trail of the Tain. He examined the track narrowly, and said, "Eighteen great battalions have gone this road, but the eighteenth has been distributed amongst the seventeen."

And that surmise was correct, for Queen Meave fearing one battalion, the Fir-Gaileen, pre-eminent in bravery and activity and mutual loyalty and affection, had broken up the same and distributed it among the rest.

Then he fetched a compass and skirted the sea, and came out in front of the Four Provinces moving on before them to Cooalney. That day he hooped the oak sapling and cut upon it in Ogham his defiance and challenge of chivalry to the great invading host. The day after that he challenged them again with the cast of the fir tree, and upon the third day he fell upon the vanguard and slew Orloff and the sons of Nera. Very happy and vain-glorious was he in his mind these days and nights, trusting to his

swiftness and impetuosity, and to his skill in war, and his incredible accuracy of slinging, and to the art known only to himself of erasing the traces of his own feet and of his chariot wheels. Every day and night he looked and listened for the coming of the Red Branch. He feared their premature advent before he should have done some notable exploits upon the foe, such as cutting off their scouting parties and stragglers, and shooting them in their camps on nights when the moon and stars shone brightly. For all athirst was the lad's soul for glory and renown, and that his name and his achievements should be commemorated to the war songs of his nation.

Next day the great host of the Tain pitched their camp in a clear space which was commanded by highlands. The sun set, and not long after the moon rose and the stars began to shine, and the blue hills all round, and the wide horizon were bathed in the moony glare. Then, when the host was preparing the booths of the chieftains and their rushy beds, cooking suppers, and cleaning chariots and horses, and a vast din arose out of the camp, suddenly there was a cry as of a warrior smitten to his death, and the whole host became silent, like the sea

beneath frosty stars when its waves fall down and are still, and in that stillness was heard a faint, clear, far-off twang, mingled with hissing, followed by another cry, as of a man smitten. Then one uttered the word, "Cuculain," and the whole host was in an uproar, and numerous battalions sallied forth, scouring the forest and the hillsides the whole night. But now in front and now behind, from the South and from the North, sounded the clear twang of the Crann Tabal, and ever some warrior cried out, smitten by the deadly bolt. Then there was held a council of the kings, and Meave was not there, but Fergus Mac Roy occupied her place on the right hand of Aileel, and the authority of Fergus was great over the kings, for Meave had sent messengers to each of them that they should obey Fergus. But when men inquired of Fergus concerning Cuculain, Fergus related the first coming of Cuculain to Emain Macha, and the dispersion of the young nobles before the king's palace, and Cormac Conlingas took up the tale, and told how while still a child he slew the hound of Culain, the smith, and acquired his surname, and how he had attached himself to Fergus above all the other knights, and other Ultonian exiles told many surprising things

concerning the youth. Then the kings proposed that Fergus should go to him and offer a great bribe, so that he might pass over to the host of Meave, and forsake the Red Branch.

CHAPTER VI.

ETERCOMAL'S FOLLY AND DEATH.

FERGUS said, "Ye will not persuade him, for when I rebelled against Concobar Mac Nessa, one not sent by me, urged him to leave the school at Emain Macha, and come out and join our hosting. He wept bitterly, but would not come out. Neither will you persuade him now, when he is sworn knight to his King."

Nevertheless, the project was pleasing to the assembled kings, and Fergus consented to bear the conditions of Cuculain.

Early in the morning Fergus Mac Roy went forth by himself, and journeyed far through the forest going northwards. He ascended a clear eminence and thence sent out his voice of power calling Cuculain by his old name, Setanta. Birds without number arose out of the woods at that unusual sound, and there was a vast commotion and a trampling of unseen feet, for the forestine tribes and populations were much

disturbed in their minds when they heard the voice of that ex-Champion of the North. Simultaneously, too, there arose one glad and clear cry, for Cuculain heard him, and hastened to meet him. His light feet as he ran was like the sound of galloping steeds. Fergus, too, hastened to meet his dear pupil, bursting through the undergrowth and dense bosage of the forest and when they met they embraced and kissed each other, and wept for a long time.

Fergus told him the conditions which he had come bearing, and Cuculain answered resolutely that he would not forsake the Red Branch, not for all the jewels in the world. Then Cuculain led Fergus along with him, and brought him to his secret place, and there were his horses feeding, and his chariot, and no wheel tracks leading thither. He arranged skins for Fergus, and went down to the stream below and speared a salmon, and with his sling he slew a wild goose in the marshes of the river, and he returned to Fergus. He lit a fire and cooked them, and took mead and ale out of his chariot, and they ate and drank and caroused and conversed until the evening star arose. Then Fergus went away to where was his chariot, and returned to the camp.

Amongst the assembled kings that night he told how Cuculain had scorned their bribe, and even as he spoke, the Crann Tabal sounded from the distant hills, and the people died. But the kings said that the bribe was not sufficient, and urged Meave to offer to him her daughter Findabar in marriage. Meave at first answered hotly and proudly. Afterwards she smiled an evil smile, and consented ; she said too that Cuculain should be governor of Olnemacta under her, to the exclusion of her own sons, or that, if he preferred it, she would make him Monarch of Ulla, in the room of Concobar Mac Nessa.

Then Fergus arose in great wrath, and dashed his spear upon the ground ; his eyes burned like coals of fire, and his voice was hoarse with anger.

“ Full well I know thy meaning, and in vain wouldst thou conceal from me the thing that is in thy mind, O crafty and perverse woman. Yet Cuculain thou shalt not this time ensnare to his destruction with lies. Nevertheless, I am willing to go to him with these conditions if the assembled kings will guarantee their performance, and take the young hero Cuculain under their protection.”

On this occasion Meave trembled before the

wrath of Fergus, and the assembled kings, Ket, son of Magah, Lewy Mac Neesh, and Nathcrandal, and Lok Mac Favash guaranteed the performance of the conditions, and extended their protection to Cuculain.

In the morning Fergus Mac Roy went for the second time to Cuculain's secret place. He found him lying on the ground upon his back, with a red-billed blackbird standing upon his hand, and himself and the blackbird whistling to one another alternately. When he saw Fergus he started to his feet, and received him affectionately and hospitably as the day before. But when Fergus told him the conditions which he had come bearing, the lad blushed and looked down upon the ground, and traced with the point of his spear upon the ground. Fergus said no more, and after that they feasted and caroused and conversed till the evening star arose.

Said Fergus: "Is there any condition on which thou wilt cease slaying the people?" And Cuculain said, "There is, but it shall be proposed by Meave, not by me."

After that Fergus departed, and returned to the camp, and Cuculain took his sling, and clomb to the brow of the hill, and looked northwards, and saw no sign of life throughout broad Ulla

He was astonished and perplexed at the silence and the incredible quietude and tranquillity which prevailed there. Long he stood and watched and listened, and at last with long strides and wide eyes wondering returned to his secret place. The mares whinnied and the blackbirds lifted up their voices when they heard his light feet.

But before the assembled kings that night in Meave's camp, Fergus Mac Roy related the rejection of their conditions, and Meave said, " There are a hundred of our people slain every night, and my trackers and scouts cannot surround him ; for when seen he ever evades them with his light feet, and if my people so perish night by night, I think not many of us will cross the Shannon returning to Olnemacta, nor of our allies to their own home. Is there any condition which this bloody youth will accept, and so cease from his slinging and slaying ? "

And Fergus said, " There is, but he would not make it known to me ; he said that we ourselves should propose it."

They debated what this might be, and when they came to no result, they appealed again to Fergus.

Fergus said :—

“ Brave, and not bloody-minded, is Cuculain, and he loves not this nocturnal slaughter which he inflicts upon us, nightly, guarding the borders of the Crave Rue. Let us make a treaty with Cuculain after this manner : That the host of Meave shall not cross the Avon Dia invading the lands of Ulla until Cuculain be subdued in single combat, and that he shall undertake to meet a warrior each day.”

The kings were surprised if Cuculain would accept such conditions, but nay the less, they and Meave ratified the proposal.

In the morning, when Fergus was ascending his chariot, he saw a youth of the camp entering his chariot also, as though he would follow him. Said Fergus :—

“ Who art thou, O youth ? ”

“ I am a flaut of the Clan Farna, and of no mean reputation, both amongst my own people at home, and here amid the congregated nations of the Tain. Etercomal men call me, and it is not creditable to thee, son of Rossa, to be ignorant of the same.”

“ Prithee, why stirring so early before the breaking of the day ? ”

“ I desire to give my horses exercise.”

“Beware how thou followest me,” said Fergus, “for I shall slay thee.”

Then Fergus and his charioteer rode away northwards, and after a space Etercomal and his charioteer went after. In his silly heart he threatened great things, and deemed that huge renown would be his before the setting of the sun. From the shores of Inver Scena had he come, where his dun looked across the great mere. Chieftains not many were around him in that barren region, and he was great in his own eyes, loquacious and empty, and buzzed around the camp like a bee. His mother had sent him forth boasting that no braver warrior followed in the Tain, and she lamented that she had permitted him to follow arms, for that in science and poetry his excellence was as great, and he might be Ard-Druid or Ard-Ollav of all Erin, had he chosen to excel in those arts; and much she boasted about him amongst her women, and amongst her vassals.

Fergus went forward to where Cuculain was, and Cuculain hastened³ to meet him. There Fergus unfolded the terms to Cuculain, and Cuculain rejoiced when he heard. After that Fergus departed from him, but ere long he observed the double track, and, fearing

treachery bade the charioteer return at full speed.

Etercomal, on his side, had followed till the chariot of Fergus stopped, and after that he drew aside into the forest, and descending, followed Fergus Mac Roy, treading the intricacies of the labyrinth. Nevertheless, he went cautiously, for great was his fear of Fergus. When Fergus had departed from Cuculain, he returned to his charioteer exulting, and they galloped up the dell. Cuculain looked forth and saw a warrior advancing towards him. He came out to meet him hospitably, and inquired the cause of his coming.

“I am come to see thee,” said Etercomal, “to know whether thy fame is equal to thy deserts.”

Cuculain laughed and said, “And now having seen me, how do I appear unto you?”

And Etercomal answered, “Thou art comely, indeed, and not unwarlike to look upon, but amongst great warriors thou wouldst not be noticed at all, nor even amongst forward strip-lings wouldst thou attract any considerable attention, and I believe that I myself could easily subdue thee.”

And Cuculain said, “Return now, O youth,

unharméd to the camp, for I think that under the protection of Fergus, my friend and tutor, thou hast come here. Therefore, I would not harm thee. Return again to the camp."

Then Etercomal began to be very brave, and he reviled Cuculain, and stepped forward to slay him. Therefore Cuculain made haste to where were his weapons, and facing Etercomal, he executed a dexterous swordstroke at the feet of the youth, by which he jerked a clod of the green turf into his breast, cone-shaped, cut with a rapid turn of the wrist. "Return back to the camp, now, for I would not slay thee," cried Cuculain, but he would not. After that Cuculain made a rapid stroke behind the shield of the other, and shore clean away the apple of gold into which his hair between his shoulders was fastened. But when he still pressed on, Cuculain's anger rose, and he put his sword through him. The charioteer took away the body and bore it back to the camp, and Fergus met him, and turned back likewise.

CHAPTER VII

FIGHTINGS AT THE FORD

THAT night among the assembled kings, Fergus told how Cuculain had accepted the conditions proposed by the Four Provinces.

Then said Meave, " I greatly desire to behold this youth, and I prithee, O Fergus, bring him down with thee into the camp, that we may see him." Fergus looked narrowly upon the Queen, but she said :

" I meditate no guile against the youth, though my dear son, Orloff, was slain by his hands ; for well I know that if he accepts these conditions, not many hours longer will he behold the sun. Moreover, these kings and myself extend to him our protection, and guarantee to him a safe departure out of the camp."

Next morning, ere the sun rose, Fergus set forth for the last time with chariots and horsemen, and returned with Cuculain, and Cuculain's friends who were in the camp ran forward to

meet him—warriors who had been fostered at the court of Concobar Mac Nessa, ere enmity had risen through the expatriation of Fergus, and the supremacy of the great Queen—Lewy Mac Neesh, and Fir Mac Be, and many others, for Cuculain had many friends ; but there came not Fardia, dearest of all, chief of the western Firbolgs, who had been a fellow pupil with Cuculain, under the tuition of Skya, warrior queen of the ragged Isle far away in the northern seas.

The kings of Erin were astonished when they saw and conversed with Cuculain, for smooth and pleasant was his countenance, and his stature not great. That day he played at hurley with the young men, and they gave him a change of raiment and a keeve of water in his wattled house, and he bathed and dressed himself and came to the feast. And the great Queen had pity on him when she saw him, and knew that ere long he would be slain, guarding the frontiers of the nation. She relented, too, from her wrath for the slaying of Orloff and the sons of Nera, and she bade the Seneschal place him between herself and Aileel at the banquet, and Cuculain hearkened to Aileel as he spoke, listening to the old man attentively and intelli-

gently. To Fergus it was a pleasure to note that the lad observed all the gentle laws in which he had been instructed.

Seeing him now close at hand and conversing with him, and observing his modesty, the men of Meave made no account of Cuculain. They lamented, too, that he was not more great and terrible, for they hoped to see some notable examples of battle-valour in the combats which were now to take place at the ford of the Avon Dia, for his marvellous slinging had raised much expectation in the camp. On the morrow, when he departed, the great Queen kissed the youth before the whole host, for very gentle was the aspect of Cuculain, and the women of the Tain grieved and conversed together concerning him and his untimely death.

Then came Far-Cu, of the Fairy Bank of the Nore, fierce, dog-headed, and demanded permission to slay Cuculain upon the morrow, and Meave trembled upon her throne when he thrust himself into the assembly, and with hateful-clamour and vociferation, declared that he alone was the hound of battle among the Gaeil, and that he would mangle and devour the northern mongrel before the eyes of the four provinces. Then, on the morrow, Cuculain came down from

his dell, and Far-Cu rushed upon him, and Cuculain slew him there amid the loud acclamations of the great host of the Tain, a heaven-ascending uproar, for he was loved by none. Cuculain slew him there before the host, and left his carcase lying half in and half out of the river-ford, and the eels came around it feeding, but in the evening Cormac Conlingas sent certain of his people and they took him away and buried him. The men of Meave rejoiced now, for they promised themselves abundant entertainment in the matter of good swordsmanship and brilliant feats of arms, and when afterwards Cas Fohla, the cunning swordsman of Tara, fell before him their joy was very great.

That man taught the use of the sword to the twelve standing battalions, who were known as the Pillars of Tara, and to him his sword was his god to whom he prayed, and whom he worshipped with bloody rites. Nevertheless, his god was not able to save him on this occasion.

Afterwards he slew Bron and Brecna, men of great bulk and strength, and the bald Fion, champion of the Dergtheena and others, whose names are not recorded. Morning and evening he climbed a hill and looked northwards to see if the Red Branch were coming to assist him ;

and his grief and wonder increased, for in spite of his victories he was not unscathed, and his strength and activity were not what they had been, and more and ever more formidable day by day were the champions who came forth against him from the great host. Then, too, day by day, the loneliness and the thought that he was forsaken grew up on him.

Next day Fer-Ai, of the Fairy Bank of Cru-hane, was chosen to meet him. He was a man of a fierce and dour countenance, a noted duellist who had slain many men. He would attend banquets where his drink was for the most part water, and there fasten quarrels on those who caroused, and afterwards slay them without difficulty in the dewy dawn. To all the bright hosts of the morning who run before and announce the coming of the Sun, he was a special horror and abomination.

“If the man meet with hurt,” said the Saba, “it will be a minishing of our slain on this road.”

The man refused.

“Nay,” said the kings, “go forth thou shalt. Otherwise we ourselves will slay thee, and across thy grave fling the three throws of infamy and dishonour.”

Perforce then the man went forth.

In this engagement Cuculain's battle-madness descended upon him, and with the stroke oblique-transverse he made of that man three parts falling horribly into the stream, and he washed his sword in the stream, and dried it, and restored it to its sheath, in silence, and he flung his broad shield behind him and strode away into the forest. In silence, too, the host watched him as he went ; in size he appeared to them to be greater, and of stature more exalted, and of aspect more terrible. Silently they separated and dispersed each man to his tent while the Avon Dia rolled down those bloody fragments to the sea.

CHAPTER VIII

THE AFFLICTION OF THE RED BRANCH

ON the seventh evening Cuculain climbed again to the crest of that mountain and looked northwards, and lo ! all Ulla as if in perfect peace and profound tranquillity. Then he saw something that moved, a chariot and horses, and a man in the chariot, who furiously scourged the horses with his left hand while his right hung limp by his side. It was Sualtam, his father,—and returning alone out of the North ! Cuculain hastened to meet him.

Sualtam gave thanks to the gods that Cuculain was yet alive, and said, “ Ill is the news that I bring to thee, O Setanta. Enchanted are all the warlike clans of Ulla, so that they are sunk in a mortal stupefaction or wildly raving like men whose intelligence has been taken away.” Cuculain was very sorrowful ; but, nevertheless, he led Sualtam to his secret recess, and unharnessed the horses and gave them drink.

He took his father to the stream and drew up the sleeve of his flaxen lena, and washed the blood away from his elbow and dried the wound carefully, and bound it up. Then he kindled a fire and cooked supper. As a servant who has come out of great jeopardy, having faithfully discharged the commands of his master and has returned to him in safety, so was Sualtam that night when he had come back to his dear son. They drank ale and metheglin afterwards under the trees, and Sualtam told his son all that had happened to him.

Parting from thee, O Setanta, I urged my steeds first to Dun Fachna for it was nigh me, passing between many flocks and herds feeding in the rich pasture, and ascended the high road to where was the king's dun. There were many craftsmen labouring and there was a noise of much industry. When I inquired for the king they pointed upwards, and like a flock of crows, I saw warriors in dark brattas on the hill-side sitting. I ascended to where they were and asked for Fachna, son of the Bear, but he himself roared like brattling thunder above my head, and waved with his left hand towards Emain Macha. Filled with terror I escaped out of that place joyfully.

“ I came to Ath-na-Forarey, and on the white cairn there was no sentinel, nor any that kept watch and ward in all the place, nor chariots yoked, nor men of war prepared to meet an enemy. On the lawn of the dun lay Conall himself, carving an ogham upon the blade of his sword. He did not look up when I spake to him, but answered mildly, ‘ If what thou sayest be true, then thy wares are good. Pass on into the province, and see that thou impose upon no one.’ And though many times I told him of thy peril, yet ever he took the drift of my speech awry.

“ I came to Emain Macha, and cried out in the city as I went through, and the timorous citizens flocked after me. As I approached the royal Dun, I heard the war-steeds neighing in their stables, and pulling madly at their halters. Leaning against the left jamb of the great gate of the stable and chariot house I saw Laeg, son of Gabra’s king, thy own skilful, impetuous, faithful, and affectionate charioteer, dear Setanta, and he with raiment soiled and disordered, and like one who had slept for many nights in his day apparel.”

Cuculain moaned and wrung unavailing hands, and bowed his comely head low between his

white knees that shone in the firelight, while Sualtam went on with his tale.

“What doest thou here, O Laeg,” I cried, “Son of Gabra’s king, heart’s friend, and sworn servant, and comrade, and charioteer, to my own son—What doest thou here, while my own son, alone, defends Ulla against the Four Provinces?”

He raised sorrowful eyes and gazed on me without reply. His countenance was like that of a man who has lost his way.

“Even as I spake, I heard a great clamour in the king’s dun, the shouting of warriors and the clash of smitten shields, and lo! in the Tec Meadcuarata, the great mead-circling hall, the knights of Concobar Mac Nessa, the chiefs of the standing battalion of Emain Macha, and at the end of the chamber, Concobar Mac Nessa, and he harangued them. Of ancient prophecy then much he spake, and of the ancestors of the Crave Rue, of Rury Mor and Ollam Fodla, of Ciombaoth, and Macha, and of Ir, the great son of Milith; of the Gael, too, how they were one race and of one tongue, and of the Clanna Rury leading the children of Milith, and of the subjugation of foreign lands, and of an Empire reaching to the Torrian sea, and I know not

what other childish talk ; but the face of every warrior was like a flame and there was a huge uproar. I sprang into the midst of the assembly, crying out, ' Cuculain is alone contending against the Four Provinces,' and Concobar answered, ' Thou bringest good news, old man ; bid him be regent of the Four Provinces till we return.'

" ' Your minds are disordered,' I cried in reply, ' and your understandings are gone from you.'

" ' Nay, nay, dear Sualtam,' he answered, with gentle courtesy, and as if he were speaking to a child or to a man very aged, ' this is my Saba of which thou art not one. Leave us now, and afterwards at supper sit at my right hand.'

" When I had left he turned to his knights and said with a smile, ' Is it not strange that one known to be witless should bring the charge of witlessness against us ? '

" They smiled too in pity, thinking each of them of the days when I was great, brave, strong, and understanding. It was I who forced the race, I assisted at the delivery of the swineherds."

" Who were the swineherds and what the delivery," asked Cuculain.

Sualtam could not tell.

“ I spent that night in the city, nor returned again to the great dun.

“ Certain young men from the Court came to wait on me. They said that talk such as that which I had heard went on daily, but there was no preparation whatsoever, and that the Empire of Concoabar began and ended with the tongue. When I was young, dear Setanta, we despised the man who talked much even when his words betrayed intelligence and understanding.

“ When I mounted my chariot to go the citizens flocked after me, and every face was pale.

“ I came to Isca Bo Nemeth, going swiftly through the sacred groves and along the shining water. I came to the door of the dun, and cried, ‘ Arise, sons of Concoabar, and haste with your battalion to Southern Coalney, for the Four Provinces are invading Ulla, and Cuculain alone defends the frontier.

“ Concoabar’s sons sat erect at the council-chamber and they moved not at all, ringed round by a silent cohort ; but six strong warriors advanced without word spoken, and seized me and bore me without the Dun and beyond the rampart, and cast me forth, as when from their house of industry bees hale forth some

worthless drone, and cast him beyond the precincts and it is death to him if he should return. So cast they me forth among the tribute paying people who gathered, pale-faced and amazed, around the dun.

“ I came to the Dun of Laegairey, the victorious son of Iliach, far-seen, resplendent amid its trees, and all around the deep foss were chariots and horses and horsemen and many warriors, for there was a great hosting of the kings and the warlike tribes of his territory. But within, at the end of the great hall, stood Laegairey, erect as a tall poplar that grows alone upon the wet inches of the river. So standing he harangued his captains and said, ‘ For now that the great son of Nessa hath fallen, I, the chief of the Red Branch by tanistry, must hence without delay to Emain Macha to assume the Ard-Rieship of the province, the royal brooch and silvern wand of rule. Yet surely, though slain, his projects shall not fail through us. Concobar has fallen, but Macha, the red-maned, daughter of Aod Roe, is still amongst us. Her high place at Emania hath she not deserted. Not in vain hast thou cast thy thoughts, O Concobar, like lightning into the children of Rury, great son of Nessa, second founder of our

race, binder together of scattered clans, expulsor of Fergus and his crew.'

"As he noised along in this fashion, I, fearing he would never make an end, for his eyes blazed like fire beneath his white brows, and much he gesticulated, shaking about neck and broad shoulders his fleece of black hair, I rushed into the midst of the assembly, crying out that the Four Provinces were invading Ulla, and thou alone defending the frontiers. He paused a moment and bade them remove me; but when his men would have laid hands on me, a poet who was present said, 'Deal tenderly with him; it is the father of Cuculain.' At the word the whole assembly was silent, and the king dropped his spears and came forward humbly, and took me by the hand and said, 'Forgive me, O Sualtam, for I knew not who it was. Verily ere this have I grieved, hearing of thy affliction. Our own minds, too, the Shee may one day trouble and impair.' Then led he me to the best chamber, and gave me keeves of water, and his people attended to the steeds and washed the chariot, and I feasted with them that night, held in great honour amongst them all, listening to the silly speech of Laegairey and his captains.

“ Every day they said they would go to Emain Macha and every day found them in their dun.

“ After that I came on to the small dun of Iliach, remote from the great road, and a green lane led thither. The land around his dun was green and fertile, though in the midst of a wild moor, and as I approached, the air was filled with sweet smells, for there were many blossoming fruit-trees there, and trim hedges and well-cared-for cattle feeding. In the door of the dun sat an aged woman grinding with one of the new mills brought from over-seas, for in the upper mill-stone was set an upright handle, with which she turned round the stone easily, and always the yellow flour spurted forth from a hole in the side upon a clean, white flaxen cloth spread upon the ground. When I inquired for Iliach, she led me through a fragrant nut-grove to where was an open space, and there I saw him, the mightiest of the great Rury’s warriors, a stained and rent bratta around him fastened with a rusty brooch, and he himself kneeling down before a hive, was fixing an addition to the lower part of the hive, and the slant beams of the descending sun smote upon him between the well-pruned trees. He received

me joyfully, for we had been comrades in the wars of Rury, though he was my elder, and he led me straightway to the house. When I told him of all that incredible folly of the Red Branch and how thou here on the borders of the Provinces contendedst alone against the Four Provinces, then though the day was far gone, was he filled with wrath and zeal for thy sake, and he ran to the fields and brought in his two horses, their necks now for a long time disused to the yoke, and drew forth the creaking chariot, and the aged woman brought forth his battle-dress, and arrayed him in it, but it was far too big for his shrunken frame. With ropes and thongs I helped him to cobble the chariot and the harness, for both were rotten with age, and his shield, long the house of spiders, was eaten through in places with rust, and the spear-heads rattled upon the extremities of the spear trees. Nevertheless, as the work went on, his form seemed to grow, and his voice and countenance became more noble. I left him there raging around his chariot, and urged my steeds to the north and east. I think that Iliach will soon be here. Nevertheless, the way is long and his steeds lazy with age and fat, and he alone of the Red Branch cometh to help thee." Then

Cuculain groaned and shed tears, gazing into the red embers of the fire, and in the silence they heard the hum and murmur of Meave's mighty host, and the drowsy twitter of Cuculain's black-birds where they slept upon their branch.

“After that I came through young plantations to the noble dun of Kethern. It was night, and the bridge up. Therefore, I beat upon the gong and shouted, and in their kennels the wolf-hounds answered me, five baying terribly. There came down women and slaves from the dun and lowered the drawbridge on the creaking hinges. The man's wife, Iondan, laid her finger upon her lips signifying silence, and led me into the dun. There upon couches lay all the fierce warriors of Kethern in an evil slumber and stupefaction, and amongst them Kethern himself, his face hollow and wan, and his grey eyes, full of trouble, rolled round like an animal's, and upon his lips and jaws was sprouting the red stubble. Amid silence and tears the discreet queen prepared food for me, and a couch, and I told her wherefore I had come. I rested there that night, and departed in the morning.

I came to Dun Kermnab where was Folloman, son of Concobar, with his battalion, and the sun

had not yet risen. Nevertheless below me on the sand I beheld the king's son, tall and straight, tracing, with his spear, lines upon the sea-sand, and his war-galleys were afloat, crowded with armed men and rowers, suspended in the washing brine, and other warriors stood armed upon the shore, awaiting some signal, which never came. Thus were they also like those I had beheld enchanted at Isca-Bo-Nemeth. There no man regarded me, but eyed me sternly when I spake.

“ After that I got me a fisherman's boat and rowed across the frith to the isle of Rathlin. But far away I heard the wailing of the son of Leda, and a smoke went up from where stood his pleasant dun, and the white streams that we have seen glittering down the slopes of the mountain around it.

“ I came to the dun of the Stammerer, the unquenchable, ever-blazing flame of the valour and chivalry of the Ultonians, Cumascra Mend Macha. With drawn sword he stood, as one on guard against an enemy, and with eyes intent and vigilant under fixed brows. He seemed to fill the whole dun.

“ ‘ What ails thee, O Stammerer ? ’ I cried, ‘ Thy mind is disordered and thy understanding

gone from thee, so that thou hast become the sport of phantoms.'

" 'Cron-Cu assails me,' he cried. 'By day and by night I keep watch and ward against him. It was I who held him down while the woman ran ; with these hands I forced red torrents out of his mouth.'

" 'My son upon the marches holds back the Four Provinces,' I shouted, but he answered not again.

"He kept watch and ward against the phantoms. I came to Cooyalney meaning to rouse thy own people, but they would not hearken, or if they hearkened, they misunderstood my speech or, if any understood, he was unwilling to come."

"Was any message or word sent to me from home ? " cried Cuculain.

"There was not," replied Sualtam.

Cuculain sprang to his feet and bowed himself down to the earth, trembling, and again stood erect, still, but breathing hard. His eyes glittered strangely, and in either white cheeks was a deep hollow, but on his jaws the muscles stood out like ropes of steel.

So he stood for a space without a word and then sat down. Sualtam, too, was for a while silent, then resumed and ended his speech.

“ And now, dear Setanta, having done all that thou desiredst I have come back to thee, and I will stay with thee and fight by thy side, seeing that all men have forsaken thee.”

Sualtam lay down to sleep wearied and travel-worn, but Cuculain slept not. He sat gazing into the fire, but as the hours went past his countenance grew more and more stern, for a courage that was like despair hour by hour continued to harden the sinews of his deep heart.

In the morning he sent his father again to Emain Macha. Unwillingly Sualtam left his son and drove his horses again into the North.

CHAPTER IX

MEAVE AND HER COMPANIONS

Now, the same night the whole host of Queen Meave was troubled, and, in the Royal Pavilion, the kings of the Four Provinces sat silent, and an evil thought festered in their hearts, and each man desired that another should be first to speak it openly. Then for them so sitting arose Bras Mac Firb, the strong lord of Osree, and with stubborn brows he harangued them, and said :

“ O Queen of the Olnemacta, and ye kings of the children of Milith, how long shall we sit here idle, and delay to waste the rich plains of Ulla before the hosting of the Red Branch, and make for ourselves the dribbling stream of the Avon Dia a barrier stronger than a rampart of brass ? Surely the fairy princes, the powerful children of Dana, have conspired to grant us the destruction of the Clanna Rury, who have relaxed the minds of Concobar and his knights, seeing that now for many days they haste not

to the assistance of the Hound. Yet ever the sun sets on our mighty host sitting here as though enchanted, bound in the toils of a foolish compact. Not for this have we come together, the far-summoned tribes of Eire, to be bound here with fetters of air, so that Cuculain may bar the progress of the Four Provinces, setting before us that silly compact, as in a narrow way the herdsman stops his cattle, putting a tree across the path from fence to fence. Not thus, I think, will the warriors of Eire be restrained here on the borders of Ulla, when we have come to trample and extinguish the fatal flame that threatens to devour us all. For surely if in this hosting we break not the power of the Red Branch, quickly will the yoke of Concobar Mac Nessa be upon the necks of the kings of Eire. Not here, indeed, are the borders of Crave Rue, they cease not but with the sea that encircles Banba. From Emain Macha, the strong bole of the Red Branch, run roots diverse, innumerable, ceasing not but with every shore, whence will start forth groves of Irian spears, even mutinous warriors who love the Red Branch. Well ye know that the bards of Eire are not our friends, but his, for the son of Nessa hath bewitched them. With gifts and flattery and attentive ears doth he

ever receive them coming. The historians and makers of tales and every slanderous and sharp-tongued satirist finds a welcome at Emain Macha, and the more we curtail their privileges, and crop their sprouting pride and domination, the more are they honoured and advanced in dignity among the Red Branch. Therefore, like a ground through which rabbits have widely burrowed, where, the wheel sinking, the chariot is upset, and those within it are rolled forth upon the plain, so is the soil of Eire beneath the feet of her kings undermined by the strolling vermin, for in every territory they came, chanting the greatness of the Red Branch. Therefore, at the first descent of the children of Rury, will there be vast anarchy and rebellion, and many a smooth-faced chieftain will show a mutinous front when the Red Hand of the Ultonians is apparent. Shall we then sit here idle and miss an opportunity of gold, sending daily our bravest to be slaughtered by that youth whom Macha hath made invincible? Shall airy words bind us here as if with fetters of brass? Better far that we break this convention which ourselves have made, than that the Red Branch break us, and the tributes and hostages of all Erin go to Emain Macha."

So spake the strong King of the Osree, and the assembly murmured doubtful approbation ; but Queen Meave looked sidelong at Fergus where he sat on the left hand of Aileel.

Then, ere the murmur had ceased, up rose Fergus Mac Roy, and fear and strength rose with him—bending fierce brows upon the assembly ; his dense hair shook around his neck and broad shoulders and like near thunder was his voice.

“ King do they call thee—High King of the Osree, O Bras Mac Fírb ?—King rather of some base Fírbolgić clan, a tribute-paying people, scorn of the warrior tribes of Erin. Even so do the fudirs of Fohla make a promise and straight-way break it, for fear has made them vile. Hateful to me is the treaty-breaker, more loathsome than the night-stalking ghoul. Fear, I see, hath eaten away thy manly heart that thou dreadst the bard-loving captain of the Red Branch, and the crooning of the bearded poet, which the brave man no more regards than the idle rail that crakes at sunset in the meadow. Verily, if the warriors of Meave were no more magnanimous than thou quickly would I cross the sea to Gaul, like Lara of Din Rie, fleeing from the presence of the vile, or into Espana, whence came forth the heroic sons of the Milith :

I would flee from Fohla as from a land accurst. But well I know that the noble kings of Eire thou wilt not persuade to break faith with Cuculain; and this I say, and by the great Dagda I swear it, which man soever of the host of Meave, I care not who, shall cross the Avon Dia invading the land of Ulla, until Cuculain be subdued, according to the compact, quickly shall this spear drink his blood, and the wolves and grey-necked crows shall eat his body, unburned and unburied."

So spake Fergus, and sat down in his place raging; but the kings feared and were ashamed, and Bras Mac Firb retreated into the crowd of the kings scared and dazed, as when a young girl, expecting indeed rain, nevertheless steps briskly out of the house, but hardly has she passed the threshold when the white lightning strikes her blind, and the thunder crashes around her ears, and in haste she runs back into her wattled house. So shrunk in among the kings the haughty Lord of the Osree before the great wrath of Fergus.

Then arose Fionmael, King of the Dairtheena, and said, "O Meave, Ard-Rian of the Olnemacta, and ye kings of Erin, no home-nurtured warrior can contend with Cuculain, so quick and dex-

terous is he in the management of his weapons, no swordsman or spear-thrower of Fohla hath taught him the art of the duello. My counsel is, that we choose out one of the two warriors who along with him have learned feats of arms at the hands of Skya, the warrior-queen, who, with her martial daughters, rules strongly the ragged isle in the northern seas, teaching only select champions of the men of Erin and Alba. Now these with us are Lewy Mac Neesh, chief of Clan Falva, and Fardia, son of Daman, son of Dary, chief of the western Firbolgs, not honoured indeed by the Milesian kings, but to my mind the foremost warrior in all Erin. One of these, therefore, shall we select, who will slay for us the Hound of Ulla, and remove this intolerable obstruction."

Then arose Lewy Mac Neesh, and said :

." Another champion than me shall ye select to go out against Cuculain. That dear friend my spear shall never pierce, nor shall his pierce me."

Then was Meave enraged, and from her throne, not moving, she harangued :

" Shall then this great host sit here idle day after day, bound in the toils of a most pernicious compact, into which we were driven by certain

persons, more friends to Cuculain than to the Four Provinces, and now our warriors must shun the brunt of his brazen spear, putting forward forsooth some pretext of ancient friendship, but in their hearts restrained by fear. Small love has Cuculain for thee, I verily believe ; for, hearing of the ancient amity, I scanned his commerce with thee narrowly when he came to the camp, and more did he avoid thee than seek after thee. Not much would he think of driving his spear through thy very faithful breast.”

But Lewy Mac Neesh, bearing himself humbly, but with a stubborn heart, made answer :

“ I fear not the charge of cowardice, though made by thee, dread Queen, before the chiefs of my nation and the far-coming kings of Eire, nor is thy judgment right concerning Cuculain ; I will not go out.”

Then said Meave, paling with sudden anger, “ Thy kingship, O Lewy, is in the hands of Aileel and myself. If thou goest not out against Cuculain I will strip thee of thy sovereignty, and expel thee out of my realm.”

Harder than the black rock over which the mad wave pours, but it always reappears, and the briny streams run white down its stubborn ribs, the son of Neesh made answer :

“ The sovereignty which thou gavest me thou mayest again take away, and across the Shannon or beyond the sea-swept borders of Eire, thou mayest expel me. All this thou mayest do, nor is my life safe against thee, though by birth of the noblest tribes of Heremon, the great son of Milesius, but against Cuculain, the son of Sualtam, I will not lift up my spear.”

Then Meave, subtle-minded, unwearable, laughed lightly, and as the sun emerging from a black cloud pours forth its light, causing the rain-drops lately fallen upon the grass and the trees to glisten like pearls, so she smiled upon Lewy Mac Neesh, and said :

“ Thy sovereignty, O son of Neesh, I will by no means take away, nor would I do myself and the nation of the Olnemacta an injury so great, for well I know thy wise government of thy territory, both in all that relates to the provident rule of the tribute-paying people, which greatly I value, for these are the soil whence the noble tribes with their spreading branches draw sap and sustenance, and also in the splendour and efficiency of the rising-out of thy territory, not to speak of the moderation and loyalty of thy bards, the rectitude of thy brehons, and the skill of thy musicians. But this I said, trying thee,

to the end that thou mightest throw off this old boyish tie, and slay for us the prime enemy, working deliverance for the Four Provinces. For truly, as said the Lord of the Osree, I fear the subjugation of all Erin at the hands of the Red Branch, if we break not their power in this hosting. But upon me, especially, will fall great shame and dishonour if I lead back my army ineffectual though attended by the rising-out of the four great provinces of Erin, Meath and Lahan, Mooan and the Olnemacta. For never before has such a great host been gathered together in this island ; and if misfortune awaits us, never again will I show my face in a gathering of the kings, never go out with my warriors, or enjoy my sovereignty any more ; and at night my bed is wet with my tears, for I see no escape from the cloud of dishonour preparing to burst upon my head. But upon thee I counted as a sure refuge whenever disaster should threaten to swallow me up, as now, for both thy father and thy father's father were my dear friends, and I honoured them above all the far-coming kings when the eve of Samhane brought to Tara the chiefs of all Eire. And thee thyself I have watched, as a king who in his youth plants a tree beside his father's dun, and hopes

one day to see it an ornament to his palace, and a protection against wintry blasts, and yearly marks how it stretches out strong arms, and knows that its roots are firm and deep in the nourishing earth. Thus have I watched thee grow into the mighty champion that thou art, an ornament and a bulwark of my realm, for all thy poems and music, the bravest and most agile warrior of the clans of Aileel, and a pillar of our sovereignty from the Shannon to the great sea westward. Come now, O Lewy, slay me this northern hound, whose claws have already torn so many of thy comrades in arms, and release me, your Queen, from this pit of ignominy into which I fall, and Fionavar I will betroth to thee with a great dowry ; yea, and make thee regent of Ulla, when we have driven out or slain the spreading tyrant that rules from Emain Macha. Great then shall be thy renown over Erin, and Alba, across the Muirnict also, in Gaul and Espan and wheresoever dwell, or shall hereafter be found, the great race of the Gael. Verily not far from thee shall be the Ard-Rieship of Erin, as King of all Ulla, and my son-in-law, and thy own birth, too, not ignoble."

But as she spake the great Queen beckoned him to herself, and she took his right hand in

hers, and placed her left upon his strong wrist ; but instead of the cath-barr a royal Ard-roth of slender gold encircled her pure white forehead and dense and shining hair. On her noble breast, beneath the white neck, she wore a fibula of gold, confining the robe of crimson silk, along whose collar and the partings in front ran a spiral embroidery of silver thread, and in her eye gathered the glistening tear as she looked into the face of Lewy Mac Neesh. But at the other side of Meave sat Fergus Mac Roy, grim and silent.

Then, in spite of shame, tears sprang in the eyes of Lewy Mac Neesh, and he answered brokenly, while with difficulty he suppressed the climbing grief: " O my Queen, demand aught else that is in thy power to ask, or in mine to grant, but against Cuculain, who has my heart's love, demand not that I lift up my spear. Sooner against myself would I draw the hard sword and spill my own life."

CHAPTER X

DEATH OF FIREBA LARNA

BUT Queen Meave, resolute in her mind as a merchant who, sailing from Ictian Port or Tor Brogan of Espana, with purpose to vend his wares, wine, or silks, or variegated beautiful armour and trinkets, at the great fair of Cahirman, though oft beat back by storms, and though oppressed at once with broken oars and mutinous mariners, nevertheless stems northward with fixed heart, so the great Queen steeled herself to the thought that by the hands of Lewy Mac Neesh should be slain the champion of Ulla—tenacious and unwearable as the weasel that through many fields and through the deep earth pursues always the same quarry, till she overtakes it, and shrill screams pierce the tender heart of evening. To her, so plotting, this stratagem seemed best.

There was in the camp a young chieftain whose bright dun stood where the Avan Lua broadens into lakes, below that deep glen where the saint, Fionabarra, retiring, built his cell on a green island in the gloomy mere, and a narrow causeway connects it with the land. From this source springing, the Lua foams along between ragged rocks till it reaches the lowlands, where it broadens into lakes. Thence came Fireba Larna. Ere this his daily pastime had been to snare trout in the Lua, setting lines and damming the tributaries, or in shooting arrows from his red yew bow. Rapid and very straight was his cunning archery. Moreover, he was exceedingly skilful to play on the tiompan and to sing many and bright songs which himself had made, and he brought laughter and lightness of heart into any company that he entered, for very frolicsome and gay was Fireba Larna. Now between him and Lewy Mac Neesh there was a bond of bardic brotherhood, for many a cunningly woven rann with rhymes and alliterations, and the subtle charm of assonance had they put together, and joined to a fitting music, and Lewy Mac Neesh was bound by his gæsa to avenge the death of his friend, and this the great Queen knew.

Him, then, the Queen summoned to her pavilion, but in her presence his laughter and gay speech forsook him, and he spoke brokenly. She set him on a couch by her side, and caressed and flattered him, and she told how she had come to the edge of a huge disaster through the great prowess of Cuculain, for that on account of him the narrow stream of the Dia was like a lofty rampart enclosing the lands of Ulla, and much she spake of Fireba's skill in archery, and she promised him her youngest daughter, Fionavar, in marriage, with a great dowry, and the chieftainship of a wide territory on the west of Loch Oribsen, should he pierce the strong heart of Cuculain with one of his arrows.

Fireba Larna answered that on the morrow he would meet Cuculain. Then he left the royal pavilion, and rejoined his comrades, stalking proudly, and he spake little, but loftily, though before very garrulous. They sought to divert him from the combat, but in vain, and there was great wrath against the High Queen. After that he went to sup with Queen Meave ; and now, for the wine had made a glad riot in his veins, and Fionavar was there sitting beside her mother, he boasted of his skill, and said that no thicker would be the fall of snow driven by a

strong south wind than would be the flight of his feathered arrows against Cuculain. "Not easily, I think," said Fireba, "will he escape that deadly shower, and I am meditating whether I shall smite him to the heart through his shield and breast, or whether I shall pierce his forehead between the bright eyes." Fionavar sat grave and tender beside her mother, and spake not at all, nor looked at him, though she heard all his words.

When Lewy Mac Neesh was aware of the plot that had been laid against him, he called Angus Lamderg, his faithful friend and attendant, and one who was prepared to give his life for the prince of Cliu Mael. For when Lamderg was yet a stripling, he had gone to the great fair at Cahirman, hoping to win renown there as a poet, and he brought thither, inscribed on tablets of the pear tree, a poem on the slaying of Eterskel by Nuada Nect. There, in a great booth, hard by the Ossorian chariot course, he recited his poem before many of the young nobles who were his coevals. Now of these one ridiculed his poetic pretensions, exciting much laughter amongst the youths. But, sitting awhile silent, Angus Lamderg ran suddenly upon him and stabbed him with his colg in the neck, for pride

and folly had taken away his wind, and the young man fell, and his life-blood poured forth upon the rush-strewn floor. Then the princes seized and bound Lamderg, and were for leading him before the king, to whom, at that time, was the regulation of the fair. But certain amongst them pleaded hard for him on account of his youth and his wild contrition; moreover, the slain man, too, was not loved, for he was accustomed to be overbearing in his discourse. No eric was permitted to be accepted for any deed of violence done at that fair, but the use of a weapon was punished by instant death. Therefore, it was resolved that he should be given a chance to save his life, and they provided him with a chariot and horses, and permitted him to pass secretly from the fair before word was given to those who ordered the fair. Then Angus, who was thenceforward called Lamderg, went away westward, swiftly, flying for his life, and he travelled day and night, for he hoped to pass into the country of the Firbolgs, north of the Shannon, whither extended not the authority of the great Fair. But he was overtaken by the avengers hard by the well-built cathair of Lewy Mac Neesh. Lewy was returning from the chase in the evening, and he saw

one flying towards his palace with tired horses that stumbled and swerved in their course, and others pursuing with fresh steeds, and the fugitive was overtaken on the lawn of the dun, and seized. Lewy went to them with his people, and when he heard all, he had compassion upon the lad, and claimed for him the right of sanctuary. The officers denied the right, saying he was taken outside the limit, and there was much wrangling. But in the end the authority of the king of the tuath was invoked, and before witnesses Lewy Mac Neesh took in his hands the canairsa by casting which the limits of the sanctuary were determined, and the homicide stood by while the generous youth exerted himself to save his young life. Then Lewy took off all his raiment, except the lena, and, standing at his door, took the hammer in his hands, twelve palms was its length from the brass to the haft-ferrule, and, wheeling, cast it far beyond the foss, upon the green lawn, tearing up the dark sod upon the dew-sprinkled glittering grass, for it was early morning, and he went thither and cast again, and went on until he had exhausted the throws which were permitted him by the law, viz., sixteen casts, and hardly, and in the last cast did he enclose the

spot at which Lamderg had been overtaken and seized.

Then Lewy led the homicide into his house, and he became one of his household, and faithful and devoted beyond all to the son of Neesh, but thenceforward he did not bear arms, and ceased wholly to practise the art of the poets, and Lewy Mac Neesh rendered to the King of Cahirman the huge fine which had been incurred by the fugitive.

Him then he called as he entered the booth ; but Lamderg ran when he heard his voice, for he was at the other side daubing with wind-excluding clay the chinks between the wattles, and inside he had suspended rugs all round the walls. Lewy Mac Neesh told him all that had taken place, and desired him to go to Cuculain and enjoin him that he should not slay Fireba Larna on the morrow. " Come now with me," said he, " to the house of Fergus Mac Roy, and he will teach thee how to find Cuculain."

Then they wrapped round them their brattas with cowls to cover the head, for it was cold ; the skies too were dark, and the wind high, and went down the main street of the camp past the market-place, and past the royal pavilion, where Fireba Larna was being feasted to his

destruction, and came to the large four-sided tent of Fergus Mac Roy. Now before the entrance on the right side there was a tall staff fixed, bearing the banner of Fergus, and armed warriors guarded the way. From within the yellow light streamed forth both through the entrance and by many a chink in the rudely woven walls, and there was a sound of abundant festivity, the noise of manly voices, the laughter of young men, and the music of the harp and the reed.

When Lewy spake to the guards about Fergus, they said that he was in the tent of Cormac Conlingas, his fellow-exile. Then as they turned to leave, there came forth the sons of Fergus, Ciar first, and after him Corc and Conmac, and also Mainey Matrimail, son of Aileel and Meave, and very dear to his mother, whence his surname. They came out with a clamorous hospitality, that they might bring in Lewy Mac Neesh and his charioteer to the feast, for they recognised the voice of Lewy. These three sons of Fergus were very noble and warlike and though youthful and exiles, their authority was great over the western tribes, for they inherited their father's unconquerable soul.

In the end they ruled over many tribes, and

their posterity spread and multiplied, so that the names of Ciar and Conmac are upon wide territories in the west of Erin to this day.

But when Lewy Mac Neesh informed them wherefore he had come they desisted, for they themselves loved Cuculain.

Then Lewy Mac Neesh and Angus Lamderg went to the tent of Cormac Conlingas. It stood round, clean-built and lofty by itself, and was ever the handsomest in the camp of Meave. When they went in they found Cormac Conlingas and Fergus Mac Roy sitting at a table drinking, and the head of Fergus stooped between his hands. Cormac arose and received them hospitably, and ordered his men to bring couches and drinking cups, and to hang their spears and shields upon the rack. In the middle of the booth there burned a bright fire, hard by the roof-tree, and a leathern flue, ending with a broad and bell-shaped band of brass, received the smoke.

Then Lewy Mac Neesh related wherefore they had come, and Cormac Conlingas laughed, and, having a lively mind, made a picture in words of the scene enacted between the Queen and Fireba Larna, and he said that poets were dangerous associates, and that they had made his father

mad, and told how he had seen the chief Kerd of the Kerd-ree repairing the Queen's broken cath-barr. Fergus Mac Roy restrained him as he jested concerning the Queen. Then Fergus took Lamderg apart, and explained to him carefully the way to Cuculain's dell and the partings of the passages in the labyrinth, and Angus wrapped his thick bratta around him and went out on his way to Cuculain.

After he had gone Lewy Mac Neesh said to Cormac :—

“ I hear a sound as of a blacksmith's iron hissing in the trough, and I know that it is the spear of Lu Lam-fada, which thou tookest out of the Dun of Celtcar, son of Uther, in the great war concerning the children of Usna. But if it is allowable I would desire very much to see it, for many times have I heard of this marvel, both by common rumour and in the tales of the poets.”

Cormac led him to where was a long-handled black spear, of which the haft was fixed in a frame against the wall, while the head was plunged deep in an urn containing a liquid, dark, save where the bubbles rose to the surface. Therein the spear shivered and writhed like a live thing. The urn was filled with the juices

of lethean and soporific herbs, but for which it would of its own accord rush against men flesh-devouring, a marvel amongst the Gael, for a fell principle of destruction dwelt within it, an emanation of the war-demons. Cormac took it from the frame, and its head out of the urn, and held it strongly in both hands holding it before him like a fishing-rod, and the spear writhed and strained in his hands like a serpent, and struggled fiercely to get away, as a kite strains strongly against the hands of him who holds the cord. Then he plunged it again into the urn, and made the haft fast in the frame, and its fury was allayed ; but the face of Lewy Mac Neesh was distorted with fear, and he sat down at the table trembling.

In the meantime, Angus Lamderg had escaped the scouts and sentinels of the camp, and gone up the river about four miles till he came to where was a ford. There he forded the river, and descended the thither bank till he reached the Ford of the Combats, after which he struck north-westward to the hills, keeping in mind the injunctions of Fergus Mac Roy ; the wolves howled round him in the forest as he went. Then, at last, he came to the dell where was Cuculain, and Cuculain heard him, for he slept

not at all, but wept, for his mind was troubled and confused, and he said that the Red Branch hated him, and that it would be pleasing to them if he should perish at the hands of the men of the Four Provinces. Then he arose, and stood at the entrance of the bower against the red fire, and Lamderg, when he saw him there, gaunt and terrible, and heard his untuned accents of fierce interrogation, was afraid, and stood still, as one who in the woods meets a man whose disordered mind impels him to wild places, where he strips off his clothes and feeds on berries and confronts horribly the wayfarer. So trembled Angus when he saw Cuculain. Then recovering his heart, he told him wherefore he had come, and Cuculain answered him gently, and led him in, and spread a rug for him before the fire, and cooked for him a portion of venison, and gave him mead to drink, and inquired much of him concerning his friends who where in the camp of Meave. Also he faithfully promised Angus that he would not hurt Fireba Larna. Then Angus departed, and Cuculain came back, and wrapped his rug around him, and lay down beside the red fire, wolf-scaring.

In the morning, at the appointed hour, Fireba Larna advanced to the Ford, stepping lightly

over the dew. On his sloping shoulders, unwarlike, hung an oblong shield bright with gold-leaf, and rivets of white findruiney. In one hand he carried two spears, and in the other his bow of red yew, inscribed with oghamic verses, and tipped with carved walrus tooth which he had got from the fishermen of Dunamarc. This the ancient kerd, whose house was beside the Avon Garf, at the ford of the Old Chariot, had carved and fitted to the bow ; at one end, the likeness of a trout with open mouth, which he had stained deftly, and dotted with crimson spots, and at the other, of a swallow with partly expanded wings, and the forked tail ran in upon the polished wood. When he came to the ford he dashed the spears upon the ground, and the shield with its strap, and stringing his bow, pluck at the sweetly-sounding string. Then, fitting to it an arrow, he awaited the approach of Cuculain, nought-fearing.

But on the other side came down Cuculain, with long strides through the stunted willows, soiled from the spring floods, and to which adhered many bands of dried grass, moving knee after white knee. His eyes were on the ground, and his left hand held the shield low, exposing his breast, and behind he trailed the

hafts of his spears. Then, indeed, had Fireba Larna obeyed the voice of Meave, and Bras Mac Ferb standing near him, he had slain the Hound of Ulla ; but as he bent to aim, he shouted a clear cry of challenge. As when one travelling in the dawn meets on lonely roads a car piled up aloft with merchandise, securely fastened with ropes and canvas, but on the top lies the driver, outstretched and asleep, overworn with much journeying ; but the horse unguided draws the car awry upon the road. Him, then, the other awakes with a shout, and he, starting swiftly from slumber, snatches at the reins. So cried Fireba Larna, and so started Cuculain, lifting rapidly both head and shield, and forthwith the singing arrow stuck fast in the brass plating and tough leather of the light shield, nor penetrated to the hero's breast. Then ran Cuculain forward, and reached the stepping stones, springing with long strides to every third stone, but for every stride flew an arrow from the light hands of Fireba Larna, and regular and unintermitted as is the sound of two threshers advancing and receding towards and from one another was the sound of Fireba's arrows as they struck the shield of Cuculain, and stood there thick as pins in the pin-cushion of a girl, con-

spicuous with their white feathers. Of these, one penetrated the right side of the shield, and passing through, fixed itself in Cuculain's hand, between the root-bones of the fore and middle fingers, and another entered the fleshy part of the left thigh on the left side of the bone. Naytheless, though limping, Cuculain came up to Fireba. Then he, Fireba Larna, snatched at the handle of his sword, but ere he could draw it, Cuculain dropped his spears, and smote him with the palm of his hand upon the ear, on the left side of his head, and a cloud came over his mind. Cuculain brake his bow, and poured his arrows into the river. After that Cuculain shook and bruised him till he cried out like a boy chastised by his master. Then Cuculain drew his short colg from his side, and cut into the flesh, and took out the arrows from his leg and from his hand, and he flung behind him his shield, and in spite of pain strode indignant to his retreat, disappearing among the trees. With difficulty did he return to his place, and a darkness came over him.

In the meantime his comrades came around Fireba Larna, who lay on the grass gulping, and the red blood poured out of his mouth. As a trout gasps in the fisherman's basket, so gasped

the unhappy Fireba, pouring the blood from lips whence only songs and laughter and happy breath came before. Nevertheless, he died not, but lived, yet ever after he was afflicted with pains in his bones, nor ever went to bed without groaning, nor left it without woe. His singing, too, and gay music were ended. For, like a song-bird with bright plumage and glittering eyes which a boy captures, spreading lime upon a rail, and confines in a narrow cage, so did he droop, and his beauty left him, and his sunny soul was overcast. Instead of songs, henceforward he composed satiric ranns and heart-vexing lampoons, and in the end he was slain by Brascal, second son of Banat, founder of the Bantree, in single combat, on the sandy shore of the harbour of Bera, hard by Dunamarc.

This was the first foul play and unfairness practised against Cuculain by the men of Meave.

CHAPTER XI

LOK MAC FAVASH

“ Alone in defence of the Ultonians—
Solitary, keeping ward the province—
Lok, the fierce King of Lath Moah,
Has slain my two black-birds,
Myself too, he severely wounded
When I was entangled by the eel.”

THEN amongst the men of Meave arose Lok Mac Favash.

“ Sufficient to me now,” he said, “ is the renown of Cuculain to render him a quarry worthy of my spear. To-morrow, the host of Meave, released from this check, will cross the Avon Dia, invading the lands of Ulla and in my armoury the head of that brave stripling will be an ornament of my dun, and a boast to my posterity.” In the morning his squires arrayed him in his battle-dress, his helmet and neck-piece and capacious leathern coat clasped round his breast and mighty waist, and over that they bound his strong breast-plate. To the

ford he went like a moving tower, on legs like the trunks of trees, and though corpulent, and past the prime of his youth, nor very quick upon his feet, yet was his strength and power irresistible, which, indeed, all men knew ; for, in the previous year, at the feast of Lunasa, held annually in honour to Lu Lamfada, on the plain of Tailteen, on that day which men in later times named the Kalends of August, he had broken in the skull of a bull with a single blow of his strong hand. Seven folds of tanned ox-hide stitched close together, o'er-ran the firm osier work of his shield, and above that was plating of brass two inches thick, and no man in the host of Meave, save Fergus only, could wield it, but on his arm it was lighter than the bratta which in sudden quarrel a man winds round his left arm, a defence against a knife. It, three brothers of the city of Limerick had made for him, and there was a painted device in the middle.

But, on the other side, came down Cuculain unarmoured, his linen tunic and crimson bratta soiled, and his brooch dulled with rust, his gold tresses tangled, and his countenance hollow and overcast ; but harder than steel was his heart in his breast and the men of Meave were astonished and said : “ Is this, indeed, he who

played at hurley with us ? ” for mighty seemed his stature, and terrible his advance, striding through the stunted willows to meet his enemy. Then his feet plashed in the shallow water of the ford, but suddenly he shrieked, and his spears fell from his hand ; for, above the head of Mac Favash he beheld the ghoul that had accompanied him unseen from the south, resting a bearded chin upon skinny knuckles, and it smiled at him. He, Cuculain, stood like one petrified, his eyes starting from their sockets, and his yellow hair stood out from his head. Then advanced Lok Mac Favash, and poising, cast his heavy spear at Cuculain’s bare breast, but it erring, went lower towards the left, and passed through the shield at the upper rim, and entered the fleshy part of Cuculain’s upper arm. Then dire agony took possession of Cuculain which was his safety, for it restored him to himself ; but Lok Mac Favash drew to him the spear by the haft, drawing the head out of Cuculain’s flesh, but the shoulders held fast in the shield, wherefore he dragged the youth forward struggling and stumbling in the water, as the fisherman draws to land some noble fish, and the blood spurted out and reddened his white tunic and his legs. The men of Meave raised a shout,

and that shout was heard in Emain Macha, and Laeg sprang from his lethargy, and listened, with wild eyes, like a hound, and after that he heard Cuculain cry out in his agony.

Meantime Lok Mac Favash was dragging Cuculain through the ford, and as he did so he laughed at and insulted him. "Verily ere now, O men of Meave," he said, "have I had good sport in fishing. For in the sea below Limerick and in the harbour of Ilaun Ard Nemeth have I drawn into my boat fish, many and great that strongly resisted, and when I brought them into my boat, if troublesome I struck them on the head with a stick. But never till now have I drawn in a fish so vigorous, or that yielded such good sport. Nevertheless, him, too, will I mollify, stroking him down with my little stick." Therewith he drew his war-mace, the head alone seventy pounds, all brass, with spikes standing out upon it like the spikes of the sea urchin, and he shook it playfully backwards towards the men of Meave.

Then was there a respite for Cuculain, and very quickly and like the crooked track of the lightning, he drew his sword and smote the spear of Mac Favash just in front of the shield, and struck in twain the strong ashed tree. Then

he recovered quickly the spears which had fallen from him, and with a cry leaped from the ford, strong and vigorous as a salmon springing over a cataract in early summer when he seeks the upper pools, and poising, was about to cast one of his spears at Lok, when, again, the spectre, breathing in his face an icy breath, confronted him, more hellish than before. Yet this time he shrieked not, nor was afraid, for despair and wrath had made him mad. Wherefore altering the direction he hurled at herself the long spear, and it seemed as though it passed through a hollow eye socket.

A horrid cry penetrated the host, whereat the war-steeds and the beasts of burden ran together alarmed, and the whole host shuddered, and men saw some formless thing fall heavily into the ford. Then, ere Cuculain could clutch his second spear, Mac Favash bore down upon him like a great ship that throws her billows on both sides from her broad prow, and beat him back into the ford, using both shield and club. Twice in succession he smote with his mighty club the shield of Cuculain, and shattered all the middle of that light shield ; Cuculain stepped back nimbly, and again lifted his spear. But once more he cried out with mingled rage and

fear, and he stood a moment as if glued to the spot, with his legs close together and working frightfully with his bloody knees. Then as Lok Mac Favash was advancing to slay him, Cuculain sprang high out of the water, and around his ankles and below the calves of his legs was there coiled three times lapped, the twine of a great eel, blue, with glittering eyes and close-tapped tail; but as he sprang high in air Cuculain smote at it with his spear, using it like a staff, striking on the left side, and with a croak like a raven, the horrid thing unwound, and fell into the bloody water. Then Cuculain poised once more his spear, and cast it at Lok Mac Favash, but the other held his round shield at an angle, and the spear screeched against the thick brass, grooving it as the ollav grooves the sand with his pen, teaching children to write, and once again Cuculain cried out, trampling wildly with his feet, and the spray went up and concealed the combat from the fierce trampling of the son of Sualtam, and the torn fragments of a strange water-weed floated down the stream from where Cuculain trampled, subduing the third transformation of the spectre:

While he was powerless Lok Mac Favash struck him on the left breast with his spiked club.

Now all the middle of Cuculain's shield was broken away, and there was a ragged border all around, and with this border, the weakest part of the shield, he intercepted the blow, but the heavy mace brake through it and fell upon his breast, and the spikes tore his flesh. Then Cuculain staggered. Nevertheless he drew his sword and struck at Lok, but the other caught it on the very boss of the shield, where the brass was four inches thick, and the sword brake and showered about the stream.

Then Cuculain looked for a moment to the wide heaven and the sun, for it was blazing noon, and his lips moved, and, swerving swiftly to the right, he stooped. Now a row of great pebbles crossed the ford, the work of some ancient king, and in a crescent-shaped line traversed the water and the dry land on each side, in order that, even in times of flood, there might be a passage for travellers, and below this was a chariot-ford where the heroes fought. Dropping the fragments of his shield, he laid his hands on the largest of these, smooth and white on the top, worn by many feet, but black and mossy upon the sides ; it, two strong navvies, such as men are now, could with difficulty roll to the shore, using crow-bars, but Cuculain raised it without diffi-

culty. As a boy, eager to get at the sweet kernel, with ease lifts the strong-shelled fruit of the palm tree, and smashes it against the flagged basement, so Cuculain raised on high above his head the mighty pebble, standing with legs apart in the ford, and dashed it on the centre of the huge shield of Lok Mac Favish. The great stone smashed through the broad shield of Lok, and smote him below the breast, and bore him to the ground, falling upon him, as one who wrestles with his enemy and falls with him to the ground, and it crushed him down under the water ; but it wanted not water to slay him, for his body was broken from the impulse of the heavy missile. Cuculain seized the spear-tree of Lok's spear which was eddying around the place, and leant upon it, panting red all over as though he had ascended out of a bath of blood. Then he drew himself together and sat down on one of the great pebbles, bowing his head between his hands, and vomited much blood into the stream. After that he rose and walked to the other shore, staggering as he went, and steadying his steps with the spear, and passed in between the willows ; and the whole host of Meave was silent, and every eye watched him, warriors craning forward with raised hands, watching

eagerly if he would fall. As when a sportsman and his beaters watch eagerly the flight of a bird which they deem is wounded, and one says he will fall, and another not, so the great host of Meave watched Cuculain as he went back, till the trees concealed him. Then there broke out a universal clamour ; but beyond the trees, amid nettles and nightshade, Cuculain lay outstretched in a deadly swoon.

CHAPTER XII

THE TEMPTATION OF FARDIA

THAT night it was resolved by Queen Meave that Fardia of the Firbolgs should go out against Cuculain. Those who knew Fardia, the son of Daman, marvelled with one another how the Queen would fare in that undertaking, for he was a dear friend of Cuculain. Fardia was not of the blood of Milesius, nor was his race equal in rank with that which now ruled over Erin, though in ancient days the Firbolgs, men said, were supreme lords over Erin.

Thinking upon these things and seeing the indignities put upon his nation, he loved not the warfare of Erin, and his youth he had spent in foreign lands where no disgrace attached to his people, and he bore himself proudly before the lords of the race of Milith, but gently to his own people and they loved him.

Then Queen Meave called to her Brasal Bawn, the herald, and he came humbly, bearing the

white staff, and adorned with insignia more gaudy than was customary in his office, for he was of a great and swelling presence, and she bade him invite to the feast that night in the royal pavilion, Fardia, son of Daman of the Firbolgs. Brasal Bawn bowed himself very low before the Queen, and went out, and passed through the camp, glancing sideways as he went, bearing the herald's white staff. When he came to the quarter of the Firbolgs he went between the spear-men at the entrance, and passed the armourers' quarter, loud with the noise of files, and found the Firbolgs amusing themselves casting great stones, with much clamour and loud laughter. Mighty of bone and thew were those champions, only not so comely as the warriors of the race of Milith. He passed roughly through the crowd that encircled those who competed, and they gave way before the envoy of the High Queen.

"Such," said he, with a loud voice, "are ever the rude pastimes of the Firbolgs, therefore it is well that ye should be segregated from the rest, but cease now your rock-throwing, and tell me if you know one Fardia, son of Daman, son of Dari, for I bear to him a command from the High Queen."

A cloud passed over the faces of the warriors, who, deemed that the fame of Fardia was greater than was implied in the words of the herald ; nevertheless they led him to where was Fardia reclined on the grassy side of a mound, musing and meditating, and Æd Shievra lay near him. Brasal drew nigh and touched him roughly with the end of the herald's staff as one who would rouse a hound from his place upon the hearth, and at the same time delivered his message.

Fardia turned quickly, and sat up, shaking his yellow locks and drawing down his heavy brows, and forthwith he stood upon his feet, and seized the staff from the herald, and struck him back-handed across the right side of the head above the ear, and the staff brake, and Brasal Bawn fell to the ground heavily, as an ox falls when his front yields before the brazen hammer. the warriors smiled but anon feared at the insult put upon the herald of the High Queen, and Fardia cried aloud, " Take beyond the lines this fool. Let him not come again against the Firbolgs." So saying, he flung from him the end of the staff that remained in his hand. Brasal after that arose from the ground trembling and dazed, and him Æd Shievra led outside the lines whimpering. By a secret way he went

to where was his own booth, avoiding the people of the camp, and sent a messenger to Mèave. Him then his servants washed, and they dressed the wound, and set before him a mess of hog's flesh with onions, and the red root of the Macan, curds in a wooden bowl and ruddy ale, and his heart revived in him. Then he sent for Far-camal, son of Rechta, who lived under the shadow of the King's Dun at Ath-an-Rie, one cunning in the laws, but not held in great honour among the discerning, who with others of his craft followed the host of Meave. Straightway he appeared, and with him a boy bearing the notched tablets, in which were set down the enechlan of every rank in Erin, and the diera and the eraic, and he explained with precision to Brasal Bawn the ancient laws of the Fenechas as they dealt with insult and injury, and Brasal Bawn was well pleased, and his greatness returned to him again, and many times he pledged Far-camal in the red ale, and reviled Fardia, the son of Daman.

Then Lewy Mac Conroy and Maine Lamgarf, son of Aileel, and Cormac Conlingas, son of the King of Ulla, for they were the most honourable of the knights of Meave, were sent by the saba of the kings to bring Fardia to the feast ; and

Fardia saw them afar off passing between the tents in their glittering equipment and bravery, and heard their light laughter and merriment. That displeased him, for haughty and lonely-sorrowful was he in mind, and he arose and went as though he saw them not, though they were now very nigh, and went and stood among his own people where they hurled the great stones. He differed not at all in raiment from the chiefs of his nation, but went roughly like themselves, though in the Picts and the Albanah, no chieftain or king outshone him in his attire. Only in stature and behaviour did he differ from them at all, and the warriors stood aside when he approached.

Then came the envoys of the Queen before him, and respectfully saluted him, and Cormac Conlingas delivered the message from the Queen. Fardia made answer that it was one of his gesa, and a silly one, not to feast in Erin with the children of Milesius, but only with his own people ; and when Cormac Conlingas began to reason with him, he answered imperiously that it was not the custom of the Firbolgs to infringe their gesa, and he nodded to Æd Shievra that he should bring forth ale. Thereat wrath collected in the heart of Maine Lamgarf, and he

moved uneasily on his feet, but Cormac Conlingas drew down his brows upon him and caused him to withhold his speech. Cormac himself after that went to where were the Firbolgs. He poised the stone in his hand, great enough to be the top stone of a cromlech, and returning, said that no champions in Erin were so mighty as the Firbolgs, and that if such warriors were around him in the great war concerning the children of Usna he and Fergus would never have been expelled out of the North by the Ultonians. Then, in spite of shame, a light beamed in the face of the son of Daman, the bright tear started into his eyes, and the great flagon trembled in his hand.

There, then, sitting at a table of red yew, in front of Fardia's booth, they drank the ruddy ale and Fardia forgot his haughtiness and told many tales of the wars between the Africans and the nations of Espan. When they arose to depart, Maine Lamgarf, son of Aileel and Meave, brake forth and said : " O Fardia Mac Daman, methinks thou art the noblest and bravest in all this great host. Well, indeed, can I believe the rumours concerning thee, seeing thee with my eyes and hearing thee with my ears. Wherefore, no man shall hereafter, I being by, dis-

parage, in my hearing, the race of the Firbolgs, I am Maine, of the rough hand and tongue, I love not stratagem or concealment, therefore know that the High Queen desires that thou shalt slay for us the son of Sualtam, and deliver us from the toils of the pernicious contract, and a great reward is prepared for thee in land, and in cattle, and in gold."

Then Fardia felt sick at heart, and a pallor overspread his face, and he said :—

"Not if the saba of the kings should give to me the whole of the level plain of Ai, which is the public land of the Olnemacta ; not if to this were added all the treasures laid up in the two Moy Turas, both of the Fomorians, and that where my own people are interred, or all that are contained in Tlatga, Usna, and Tailteen, nor all that the sacred précincts of Tara hold within its border at the Feis Tara what time its king is undisputed lord of all Erin ; not for this would I look in anger upon Cuculain, son of Sualtam, nor slay him, nor dishonour him ; though this, too, I know full well, that I alone, the Firbolg, of all whom Erin contains within its sea-swept bounds, could subdue the Hound of Battle of Murthemney. And tempt me not again, O son of the High Queen, for no gentle answer shall

then be in my mouth. Well ye knew the ancient friendship between me and Cuculain ! Our sovereignty we the Firbolgs have long since lost, and our lands, and our honours, yet ye, the children of Milith, desire that we should still further dishonour the vows of our order, and expel our heart's love at your pleasure. Verily, O son of the High Queen, the Firbolgs, in their degradation, are more kingly."

Then returned the envoys in silence to the Queen and the saba of her kings, and they told what had happened, and said, " Prouder than the King of Tara, when all Erin admits his sovereignty, is this haughty champion of the Firbolgs." And Cormac Conlingas said, " Thyself, O Queen, or thy fair daughter, alone can bend his stubborn soul," for very subtle-minded and discerning was he.

Then the Queen sent to him Fionavar, her beautiful child of the arched eyebrows, and Fardia come forth to meet her, and the noblest of the Firbolgs with him, for he saw her afar off ; and Fionavar wondered at their stature, for they were very great, majestic with unshorn beards. Fardia bowed himself very low, even to the ground, before the daughter of the High Queen, but she raised him with her hand, and said :—

“ Shame fills me, O son of Daman, and sorrow, whene’er I come into the presence of thy nation, knowing whose are the duns in which we dwell, and who reclaimed from forest the territories whose tributes and sovereignty we enjoy ; and not by our own prowess, too, did we come to this, but through the contrivance of the high gods of Erin who brought down thy race, for their power is over all. And verily, often ere this have I been sad, seeing the noblest of thy nation, and their kingly bearing, and their might. But now the Queen hath sent me, for she greatly desires that thou shouldst feast with her to-night in the royal pavilion, and because of thy gesa there shall not be bidden to this banquet any of the children of Milith, and truly this vow was most right, for they, the haughty princes, revere not always the guest when ale hath loosed their tongues. Beside thyself and thy comrades, Meave only and myself, who through Matha of Meyrisk derive our line from the Firbolgs, will be present at this feast.”

Then Fardia answered very humbly, saying that he would go, and protested much concerning the ancient boyish vow, and after that Fiona-var talked with Fardia and the Firbolgs, turning sweetly from warrior to rough warrior. Then

an attendant poured forth metheglin into a silver cup, and presented it to Fionavar, and she drank it, and spake of the making of the drink for she herself was accustomed to make mead, and at Rath-Cruhane her bees were hived in a sunny field, eastward from the great dun, beneath a warm hedge, and that field was called Gort Fionavar. When she left with the queens that were her company, Fardia sent a battalion of spearmen who attended her to the royal pavilion, and they came back and dispersed each man to his tent.

Then went Fardia into his booth, bending his lofty head in the door-way where the Firbolgs had made for him a great booth, by the meeting of tall, straight firs set on end, with interlacing rods and lissom twigs of the willow gathered along the banks of the Avon Dia. They had roofed it above with water-flags, securing them against the wind with ropes of twisted hay, crossing and recrossing like a trellis-work, and had worked wicker windows into the sides, to be opened and closed as the wind blew from this point or from that. Yet though high the door-way, still bowed Fardia, his yellow head as he entered the booth. Within were three large boxes of pine-wood ranged against the wall.

These he unlocked, and took from thence many garments bright with corcur, and rue, and glaisheen, and short colgs of glittering bronze, with handles of ivory riveted with silver studs, and long, shapely swords, straight throughout, or broadening towards the middle, but ending in a point keen as a needle, most like the beautiful blade of the waterflag growing luxuriant in the spring-time in the wet inches of the river, and trembling with its golden flower. Thence make boys their mimic boats with sails, and launch upon the running stream. These all he took and laid upon the rugs upon the ground, and Æd Shievra assisted him.

After this he despatched his attendants to the chiefs of the Firbolgs, selecting by name such as were the noblest and most princely, and most worthy to sit at meat with the great Queen and the gentle maiden, twenty-five in all, and when they came to him, he distributed to each man raiment and bright weapons, brooches, torcs, and minds, and shining shields. They were in the remnant of a mighty eric which had been rendered to him after the coming together of Tain.

Thence Fardia made distribution among his comrades ; to every man a brat and an inar,

and a lena, bright ocrat for the legs, and shoes glittering with silver thread and findruiney : and to his singing men and harpers, his jugglers and chanters of tales, he gave an equipment in like manner. He urged them all to make careful preparation for the feast, and to wrong not the Firbolgs before the great Queen and the gracious Princess Fionavar, of the delicate eyebrows. She was the youngest child of Aileel and Meave, having three sisters and seven brothers. To Aileel there were born other children also, whom his concubines bore to him amongst the Olnemacta.

Meantime, Æd Shievra bore water from without the camp, and filled the hero's keeve, and he himself, Fardia, the son of Daman, bathed his mighty limbs, pouring many times the cold water over his head, and he stood forth out of the bath while the steam ascended from his sides. Then, carefully choosing it, he put around him a lena of fine linen, three-fold, and it descended to his knotted knees, with loose collar, and stripes white, scarlet, and purple, running from the waist to the hem. Then he combed his yellow hair, lustrous like a sheaf of gold thread in the house of a kerd, falling in dense curls on his great shoulders. He who next touched that

hair was Cuculain raising tress after yellow tress, while the hot tears fell. But he, Fardia, exulting, put upon him an inar, also linen, dyed saffron, with loose sleeves, slashed with silver and lined with fine, soft white skin brought from over-seas by the merchant. From beneath the inar he drew forth the collar of the lena, decorated with gold thread and crimson, and it surrounded his neck and shoulders, and with many gold clasps he fastened the inar in front, and at the throat he closed it to him with a fibula of gold, six ounces in weight. After that he took a belt made of innumerable little silver rings linked together, a span was its breadth, and in front where the ends joined there was the likeness of two serpents interlaced. This he himself had brought back from Espan, receiving it as a ransom, having taken prisoner a stripling, son of a noble African. This he clasped around his waist, confining the loose inar which descended not below his hips, covering the upper buds of the variegated stripes of the lena. Then upon his shining feet he bound his sandals, lined with soft doeskin, winding over ankle and instep the pliant strap, and he turned down the ends carefully under the loop. Into its place in the belt he passed his colg, gold-handled, a cubit

in length, such as men wore then, and gems glittered in the gold. Last of all, over his ample shoulders he flung his vast bratta, of crimson silk, bright as the clouds of sunrise, glittering with strange hues that came and went, and secured it with a great brooch of gold, round as a wheel, to glitter upon his breast. The long delg of it traversed the folds of the gorgeous fuan.

Then Fardia strode resplendent from his tent. The Firbolgs shouted when they saw him, and the young nobles, his young friends and comrades, ran round him jesting, yet, too, they were astonished, for no mortal man did he resemble, and they said that such was Angus of the Brugh, son of the Dagda, for he seemed like a fairy prince of the Tuatha of Erin, emerging from a sacred dell in one of the mountains of the Shee. Along with Fardia came forth his attendant, bearing his sword and belt, his spears, and a banqueting shield, pure white, inscribed with a cunning device wrought for him by a kerd of the Olne-macta.

So went forth Fardia and his comrades, and the armour-bearers went before them. In the main street, hard by the entrance of the quarter of the Firbolgs, stood Firænah, a soothsayer,

very skilful in auguries and the notes of birds ; and he came before Fardia, shedding tears, and cast himself upon the ground, and clasped his feet. Through nine generations his ancestors had served the ancestors of Fardia, but he was himself free, having been born in the tenth. But Fardia laughed, and raised him with his hand, for he cared not at all for auguries, and it was a grief to the Firbolgs when they heard him scoffing, for much travel and passing to and fro had made him unwise. For Firænah they had erected a hut in a remote part of the camp, where there was a quiet hollow and a pond, and many wrens and ravens hopped around the hut or rested upon the roof, and there was a ceaseless clamour ; but Firænah understood all their voices, ever listening with attentive ear, and the people honoured him greatly. He now with many tears implored of Fardia not to go to that banquet, for an evil fate was impending upon him, and that sinister and evil were the notes of all the birds. But Fardia laughed lightly, releasing himself, and so fared forward with his comrades. Then the old man returned to his hut weeping, and the Firbolgs came round him, inquiring eagerly. A dark rumour went through the camp, and there arose a lamentation, as in a

house of the dead when the traveller sees the lights and hears the voice of the mourners, so wept and lamented the blameless Firbolgs over their champion, as though he were already slain.

But Fardia and his companions were drawing near to the royal pavilion full of exultation and glory, and the old king welcomed them according to the ancient custom with a feeble clapping of his aged hands, a thin, weak noise, not such as when, in the ancient days, he had welcomed to Rath-Cruhane the many kings whom over tuath and mor-tuath he had appointed, having quelled the lawless tribes of the Olnemacta, a bridegroom high-worthy even of Meave. But she, Meave, the daughter of Eocha, rose with unfaded awful beauty to receive the might of the Firbolgs, and along with her the gentle princess, and Fardia marked where his shield was hanged upon the wall, for the armour-bearers were the first to enter the feasting chambers ; and Aileel was upon his left hand, and Fionavar upon the right.

There, then, they feasted under the light of waxen tapers, tall as a warrior's spear, not permitted in the houses of the nobles, and to the music of many an angled harp.

Then, when the night was advanced and Fionavar and the princesses that were her company had withdrawn to the pavilion of the Queen's people without the camp, and when the red ale had made riot in men's veins, Queen Meave unfolded to him the resolution of the saba of her kings, namely, that Fardia should fight with Cuculain on the morrow and that if the hound of Ulla should fall by his hand, or be driven from the ford, he should receive twenty ploughlands of the level plains of Ai, paying nothing in cattle, gold, or weapons, nor yet by military service, save voluntarily, and also cattle and farm implements, and the youngest daughter of the High Queen, Fionavar, the sweet-voiced princess, in marriage, with a great dowry, and that if he refused he should suffer a proclamation of disgrace and outlawry to be determined on at the council of the kings, and announced before the whole people, with the opprobrious chanting of satirists and druids, so that shame and disgrace would cling to him and his nation to the end of time. Fardia consented to meet Cuculain, but not through fear of the druids and their hilltop satires, nor from avarice; but owing to the great love and affection he had conceived for the gentle princess

even while she was yet a young child, for she was accustomed to accompany Aileel and Meave in the royal circuits which they made each year, and though warring in far lands, that gentle countenance beamed ever before his mind, star-like and pure. Then the Queen sent for six out of the nine kings of territories which were kings under her, and a solemn pledge was given before the aire-forgail of the province, he who was president of the high court of the whole nation of the Olnemacta, and in the presence of witnesses, according to the ancient law; and besides all this, Queen Meave invoked the sacred names of Buan, and Morann, and Cairbre Cincait, high gods of the Olnemacta, that she would fulfil those conditions.

Also the High Queen took the royal brooch from her breast and gave it to Fardia, and Fardia gave his brooch to the Queen. After that they devoted themselves again to merriment and festivity, and at midnight Fardia and his comrades returned to their quarters with much clamour, and dispersed among their booths.

Through the night there was silence in the wide host of Meave; but at day-dawn Æd Shievra stood beside the couch of his lord with

a cup of cold water from the spring, keen with frost, and Fardia drank it from the hand of his attendant, and sat up. But the inebriation had gone out of him, and he remembered all, and cried out, and tore his yellow hair, swaying to and fro, and Æd Shievra stood silent beside him. Then came the warriors of his tribe, and Fardia started forth from his couch, and arrayed himself in his battle-dress ; but he removed not the royal brooch from off his breast. Then harnessed Æd Shievra the war-steeds, and yoked the chariot, and Æd Shievra seized the scourge and urged forward the willing steeds.

In like manner, from the rest of the camp came forth the kings and warriors of the four provinces of Erin, and poured forth after the son of Daman to the ford, eastward. Moreover, on all the eminences and rising ground rearward gathered the women and provision bringers, even the innumerable camp-followers that followed the course of the men-of-war ; and the whole land, even to the verge of the plain where they darkened against the sky, was filled with the great multitude. But on the other side of the stream, lo, the silent woods and the white untrodden road, and beyond that the plains of Ulla, all waste and silent, for there was no man

there, neither oxen or horses, not any living thing that might be seen, only empty fields and deserted homesteads.

CHAPTER XIII

A SUNDERED FRIENDSHIP

It was night and chilly with frost when Cuculain awoke out of the swoon ; his limbs were stiff, and he lay down again and wept, not for the pain, but for loneliness and sorrow.

All that night, Cuculain's mind was clouded and disturbed, for he said that his clan had conspired against him, seeing that he was abandoned and alone, warring now for many days against the whole host of Meave, keeping ward over the gates of the province. And now, too, he knew that he should die, for the thought of flight, and of the surrender of Murthemney to the waster came not at all into his noble mind, and he called upon all the Red Branch by name, lamenting loud, Laegairey the Victorious, and Celtcar, the son of Uther, Fergus Mac Leda, Factna Mac Mahoon, and his foster brethren, sons of the High King, and Conall Carna, dearest of all, and his voice penetrated the starry night,

for he cried out as a woman cries when the man whom she loves has forsaken her ; so in his agony Cuculain, the son of Sualtam, lifted up his voice, and the men of Meave heard him ; for he said that he was forsaken and all men leagued against him. Moreover, as the moon set, he saw faces that moved amongst the trees mocking him, and horrid things, formless and cold, estrays out of the fold of hell, wandering blots of the everlasting darkness, and there was laughter in the hollow chambers of the forest, and again the Banshee of Lok Mac Favash smiled at him and beckoned, and the cold water-serpent clung around his feet, and all the chords of his mind were torn or unstrung, for it was the purpose of the high gods of the Gael to deliver him over to great affliction. Like an army of devastators that waste and burn and drive away, leaving behind them blackened homes and streams made thick with blood, so wasted they all the pleasant tracts of his serene spirit. At first the horses, being affrighted, pulled madly at their tethers, but anon when he sank down between them like a stone they stooped down over him wondering, and he felt their warm breath upon his face. Then the demons that affrighted him gave back, and he arose and put

an arm around the neck of either steed, and stood between them trembling. With their fleet limbs, swifter than the naked winds of March, had he borne away the daughter of Manach, high-souled Emer out of Bregia. Munfadda (Long Mane) and Raylteen Gal (Little White Star) were their names. They were pale yellow in hue, save that on the breast of one, where the wind-pipe enters the lungs, was a spot of purest white. For two hundred cumals he had purchased them, and he gave them to Emer. With her own hands each day she used to feed them with barley and white curds and sweet whey. Very gentle were they, and knew the thoughts of those who loved them.

Then a milder mood possessed him, and he remembered his friends who were with Meave, and how they had received him coming, and he recalled the firm friendship of Lewy Mac Neesh and Fergus and others, and especially he thought of Fardia, the son of Daman, now warring, as he believed, among the Clanna Gædil in Espan, and, as he thought on these things, lo, the dawn trembling through the forest, and the hoar frost glittering on the grass.

Then stared forth Cuculain, and he drew from the chariot the venison which he had cooked, and

ate thereof, and drank his last draught of ale, making a gurgle in his strong bare throat, and his strength revived in him. Nevertheless, his countenance was hollow and wan, dull were his splendid eyes, and there was a wound in his hand and in his leg, and a great one in his left side, and his breast was mangled, and all his body black with dried gore.

Then he tore away the steel work and bronze work from his chariot, and filled therewith the broken centre and upper rim of his shield, strapping it tightly with the leathern reins, and with the colg that was by his side he hewed down a straight fir tree, and shore away the crackling branches, and cut off the top. After this he brake off the steel peak of the chariot, and sunk it into the rough spear-tree, and bound it firmly to the wood. Then arose Cuculain, the unconquerable, striding through the forest, and he wondered which of the great champions of Meave should be brought against him that day ; and when he came out into the open he beheld the whole south country filled with a vast multitude as if it had been the Ænech of Tailteen or the great Feis of Tara when the authority of the Ard-Ri is supreme, and all the tribes of Erin gather together with their kings. He saw not

at first who was the champion that had come out against him, as he came along down stream through the tasselled willows. Then he stood on the edge of the ford, and looked across, and he saw Fardia, son of Daman, of the Firbolgs, and Fardia looked upon Cuculain, and Cuculain looked upon Fardia.

Then Cuculain blushed, and his neck and face above, and his temples waxed fiery red, and then again, paler than the white flower of the thorn, and his jaws fell, and he stood like one stupefied ; but Fardia held his shield unmoved, with his spears resting on the ground, and beneath the heavy cath-barr his brows stronger than brass.

Cuculain sent forth a voice hoarse and untuned and said :—

“ Is it Fardia Mac Daman of the Firbolgs, for there is a mist before my eyes ? ”

But Fardia answered not.

Then said Cuculain :—

“ Art thou come out to meet me in arms to-day, seeking to slay me ? ”

And Fardia answered sternly :—

“ Go back, O Cuculain, to thy own people, and cease to bar the gates of the North against our host, and I shall not slay thee or dishonour thee, but if thou remainest I shall slay thee here

at the ford. Therefore, I bid thee go back into the province.”

Cuculain answered him, and his voice became like the voice of a young girl, or the accents of one seeking an alms.

“ And is it thou alone of all this great host that hast come out against thy friend, seeking to slay me or dishonour me? There are the battle standards of all the warrior tribes of Erin, save only of the Ultonians, the banners of the children of Ith and Heber, all the far-spreading clans of Heremon, the children of Amargin and Brega, of Donn and Biela, and the Desie of Temair; there are the warlike clans of the Fomoro and the remnant of the people of Partholan, the Clanna Nemedh from the great harbour southwards, the children of Orba, the Ernai, and the Osree, the Gamaradians, and the Clan Dega. Could no champion be sought out of the great host that covers the green plains of Conaul Murthemney, to the limits of the furthest hills, to come out against me, but that thou alone should stand forth against thy friend? Persist not, O son of Daman, but retire, and I will meet three champions instead of one from this day forward. We parted with mutual gifts and with tears, why does thy spear now

thirst after my blood, and why dost thou seek to dishonour me ? ”

And Fardia made answer :—

“ Other champions, by their prowess, bear away many gifts, why should I ever have my hands empty ? Bright as the sun is the brooch of Meave, which she has given me, the Royal Brooch of Cruhane, emblem of sovereignty among the Gael. Gems glitter along the rim. Like a level sunbeam in the forest is the shining delg of it. I shall have honour while I live, and my clan after me shall be glorious to the end of time. Therefore, prepare for battle, son of Sualtam. I remember thee not at all, or as one whom years since I met, and straight again forgot. Therefore, prepare thyself for battle, or I shall slay thee off thy guard.”

And Cuculain said :—

“ O Fardia, I believe thee not. Full well dost thou remember. Beneath the same rug we slept, and sat together at the feast, and side by side we went into the red battle. Together we consumed cities, and drave away captives. Together we practised feats of arms before the warrior queen, grieving when either got hurt. Together we kept back the streaming foe in the day of disaster, when the battle torrent roared

over us, either guarding the other more than himself."

Then beneath his lowering brows the hot tears burst forth from the eyes of the son of Daman, and fell continuously from his beard, and he answered with a voice most stern, but that held within it a piteous tone, like a vessel in which the careless eye sees not the hidden flaw, but at a touch, lo! it is broken. So sounded the stern voice of the warrior.

"Go back now, O Cuculain, to thy pleasant dun—Dun Dalgan by the sea. Go back now, for I would not slay thee, and rule over Murthemney and the rough headland of thy sires, and Meave will not waste thy territory or injure aught that is thine. And care no more for the Red Branch, for they have forsaken thee, and given thee over to destruction, who have conspired against thee, trusting in thy great heart that thou wouldst be slain on the marches of the province, holding the gates of the North against their foes, for Hound is thy name and Royal Hound thy nature. Therefore go back, O Cuculain, and save thy young life; return now to thy infant son and thy sweet bride. Go back, O Cuculain, for sweet is life, the life of the warrior, and very dark and sorrowful and empty is the grave."

“ I will not go back, O Fardia, but here on the marches, while there is blood in my veins, and while reason, like a king rebelled against but unsubdued, holds the sovereignty of my mind, I will contest the borders of my nation, though forsaken and alone. My people have indeed abandoned me and conspired for my destruction ; but there is no power in Erin to dissolve my knightship to the son of Nessa and my kinship with the Crave Rue. Though they hate me, yet cannot I expel this love out of my heart. And not the kings alone and the might of the Red Branch, but the women, and the young children of Ulla are under my protection, and all the unwarlike tribes, and the cattle, and this the sacred soil of Ulla upon which I stand. And this too well I know, that no power in the earth or in the air can keep the Red Branch my foe for ever, and that loud and deep will be their sorrow when the red pyre flames beneath me, And seek not to terrify me with death, O son of Daman : of yore, too, our minds did not agree ; for dark and sorrowful death is not, but a passage to the land of the ever young, the Tir-na-n-ogue. There shall I see the Danaan princes face to face, and there the heroic sons of Milith, and himself, a mighty shade, and there all the

noblest of the earth. There hatred and scorn are not known, nor the rupturing of friendships, but sweet love rules over all."

"Go back, O Cuculain ; go back now again, for I would not slay thee. Think no more of the son of Nessa and the Red Branch, than whom the race of Milith had produced nought fiercer or more baleful. Rooted out and cast down shall be the Red Branch in this foray, whether thou, O Cuculain, survivest or art slain. Go back, O son of Sualtam, return to thy own dun. Once indeed thou wast obedient to me and served me, and polished my armour, and tied up my spears submissive to my commands. Therefore go back ; add not thy blood to the bloody stream."

"Revilest thou my nation, O son of Daman. Talk no more now, but prepare thyself for battle and for death. I will not obey thee or retire before thee, nor shalt thou at all dishonour me as thou hast most foully dishonoured thyself. This indeed I well know, that I shall be slain at the ford when my strength has passed away, or my mind is overthrown ; but by thee, O son of Daman, I shall not meet my death. Once indeed I was obedient to thee, because I was younger than thee. Therefore was I then

a servant unto thee, but not now ; and which of us twain shall die I know, and it is thou, O Fardia."

Thereafter then they fought, and Cuculain had no weapon save only his colg, for the Gae Bolg, the rude spear which he had fashioned, had fallen from his hands. Against him Fardia discharged his javelins at the same time, for he was ambidexter, and quick as lightning, Cuculain avoided them, and they stuck trembling in the thither bank, and quick to right and left Cuculain severed the leathern thongs, rushing forward. Then drew Fardia his mighty sword that made a flaming crescent as it flashed most bright and terrible, and rushed headlong upon Cuculain, and they met in the midst of the ford. Straightway there arose a spray and a mist from the trampling of the heroes, and through the mist their forms moved hugely, like two giants of the Fomoroh contending in a storm. The war-demons, too, contended around them fighting, the Bocanahs and Bananahs, the wild people of the glens and the demons of the air, and screeched in the screeching on the armour, in the clash of the shields, and the clatter of land and meeting colg. Now the warriors of Meave grew pale, and the war-steeds brake loose and

flew through the plain with the war-cars, and the women and camp-followers brake forth south-westward and fled, and the upper water of the divine stream gathered together for fear, and reared itself aloft like a steed that had seen a spectre, with jags of torn water and tossing foam. Cuculain was red all over, like a garment raised out of the dyeing-vat, and Fardia's great sword made havoc in his unarmoured flesh. Three times Cuculain closed with the Firbolg, seeking to get within the ponderous shield, and three times the son of Daman cast him off, as the cliffs of Eyrus cast off a foaming billow of the great sea ; but when the fourth time he was rushing on like a storm, he heard, as it were, the voice of Laeg, the son of the King of Gabra, his attendant and charioteer, taunting and insulting him, and himself he saw in a vision standing in the river ford on the left, for he was accustomed to revile Cuculain. Yet this time, too, the Firbolg cast him off, and advanced upon Cuculain to slay him. Then stepped back Cuculain quickly, and the men of Meave shouted, for Cuculain's shield was falling in pieces. But again sprang forward the Hound of Ulla, stooping, with the Gae Bolg in his hand, using it like a spearman in the battle, and he drave Fardia

through the ford and up on the hither bank, pressing mightily against the shield. When the Firbolgs saw what was done they feared greatly for their champion ; they raised a sudden howl of lamentation and rage, and rushed forward, breaking through the guards : which, when, Fergus Mac Roy beheld, he sprang down from his chariot, shouting dreadfully, and put his hand into the hollow of his shield, and took out his battle-stone, and smote Imchall, the son of Dega, with the battle-stone upon the head, and he fell rushing forward amongst the first. Now, too, Cormac Conlingas and Maine Lamgarf ran thither with the Queen's spearsmen restraining the Firbolgs.

But, meantime, Cuculain, lifted suddenly the Gae Bolg above his head, and plunged it into Fardia. It passed through the upper rim of the brazen shield, and through the strong bones of his breast beneath his beard, and he fell backward with a crash, and grasped with outstretched hands at the ground, and his spirit went out of him, and he died.

Cuculain plucked out the spear, and stood above him, panting, as a hound pants returning from the chase, and the war-demons passed out of him, and he looked upon Fardia, and a great

sorrow overwhelmed him, and he lamented and moaned over Fardia, joining his voice to the howl of the Firbolgs, the great-hearted children of Mac Eric, and he took off the cath-barr from the head of Fardia, and unwound his yellow hair, tress after bright tress, most beautiful, shedding many tears, and he opened the battle-dress and took out the Queen's brooch—that for which his friend as he deemed had come to slay him—and he 'cursed the lifeless metal, and cast it from him into the air, southwards over the host, and men saw it no more.

CHAPTER XIV

LAEG

I am Laeg, son of Gabra's king,
It was I who guided his horses.

AT Emain Macha, in the clear dawning of the day, Laeg, son of Gabra's king, lay in his bed, still as a felled tree. Lacking something—he knew not what, his grey, bright eyes were wild. Though the door was shut, an ice-cold blast blew upon the charioteer ; he gathered his rug around him, yet was not the warmer. Then, through a vanishing mist, Laeg saw clearly a young man, alone, knee-deep in a river-ford, who leaned with both hands upon a spear, and vomited blood into the running river. His raiment was in rags, his body bruised, torn, and cut ; the great hands above his bowed head were hacked on the back, and himself stained with blood and gore. Laeg sprang from his

couch with a cry, and stood dazed and quaking, for this man who he had seen in the ford was his dear master ; and it was taught to him at the self-same moment that Cuculain, son of Sualtam, alone upon the frontiers, held back the Four Provinces of Erin, friendless, solitary, guarding the marches of Ultonia, and that his strength was failing, and the mighty cordage of his great heart was yielding to the strain, while the war-waves ever beat upon him, implacable, unceasing, ever renewed, and famine assailed him and the loneliness and horror of extreme isolation closed around him :—

Alone in defence of the Ultonians,
Solitary keeping guard over the Province.

Then he heard the very bitter cry of Dethcæn's nursling, Sualtam's son, his own dear school-fellow and loving friend and master.

Forthwith all his mind came back to him, and in the royal stables he heard the steeds of Cuculain neighing, and stamping, and pulling madly at their halters, and in the chariot-house the muttering of the war-demons, and in the Tec Brac the ocean-murmur of the shield of Concobar, and far away the Tonn Rury moaning responsive in the north ; also round and over

and under all these sounds he heard the noise of a great lamentation, even the women of the Ultonians wailing, and the young children, the immature and unwarlike scions of the Red Branch, weeping for extreme shame and crying aloud to their unconscious sires. Like a storm Laeg burst into the great dormitory of the standing-battalion of Emain Macha, and from the threshold cried with a loud voice ; “ Up, out, and follow now, on the instant, if you are men, to the ford of the Avon Dia, Murthemney’s narrow mearing, where, alone, Cuculain holds back the Four Provinces ! ”

At that unusual clamour seven hundred giant forms reared themselves throughout the vast chamber, and leaning upon their pillows, gazed in silence at the speaker, with eyes of mild wonder—and again subsided—sighing deeply, for the curse of the Red-Maned Macha lay like lead upon their souls.

At the extreme end of the chamber one mighty form reared himself to sitting, a bearded champion, with eyes and an aspect of great authority : “ Nay,” said he, “ son of Gabra’s king, there is a time for all things and a befitting occasion.” The man was Concobar, son of Factna, son of Cas, son of Rury, Captain of the Red Branch,

and High King of the Ultonians. He, too, sank down like the rest, and was still.

Laeg sprang thrice on the threshold and cursed them by all his gods.

To the chariot-house and stables of Macha then he ran and rushed forth the chariot, blazing, into the light of day, and returning, loosed the great steeds. Neighing terribly, they hastened to their accustomed places on either side of the long chariot-pole of red-yew shod with silver, the Liath Macha on the right and Black Shangan on the left, and stood there trembling and stooped, with shaken manes and wild eyes. To the Tec Brac then he ran, and returned swiftly, laden with Cuculain's shining war-gear and martial equipment. Deftly and quickly the son of Gabra's king made them fast and secure in their places in the war-car, and he yoked the horses, and seized his scourge. He cried to them to go, and lashed the divine horses, and they went. Like rattling thunder the brazen wheels sounded through the block-paved streets of Emain Macha. As when in a city in the night there is a cry of fire, and straightway with the sound of the horn and thunder of wheels and steel-shod hoofs the rushing steeds bear onward through dark streets the fire-subduers, and

sparks fly out on every side from the smitten flint, so Laeg, son of Rianganabra, drave through the city of Emain Macha, while the people fled ; terribly Laeg shouted, and terribly the Tuatha De Danan, themselves unseen, shouted around him in the air. So shouting, Laeg rushed under the echoing gates and across the sounding bridge, and swept over the Plain of the Hostings, and the noble steeds themselves flew along, nor needed at all the scourge of the charioteer, which, nevertheless, the son of Rianganabra laid furiously upon their foaming sides, leaning forward in the war-car animating them with his cries. And so drave Laeg, as though upon the smooth plains of Tailtean he contended with the youths of Erin about a prize in the chariot race. But not now for brazen cauldrons contended Laeg, or for bright weapons, or for gold, but for the life of his master and dear friend, the blameless Cuculain.

Over every territory through which he flew, far and wide, penetrated the brazen din, for around him there arose the many-sounding musical tumult of bells that rang, and brazen traces that clanked, and the noise of shaken shields and rattling spears, of javelins, swords, and sling-bolts, and battle-hammers, and defensive

armour, even the whole martial equipment of Cuculain, and the wheels brayed upon the block paved roads, and the clamour of the unseen ones increased, endlessly shouting around the son of Riangabra. But Laeg thought only of his master, and of that most precious life somewhere in jeopardy, and the cry of Cuculain ever sounded in his ears.

So all day long the chariot brayed along the stony ways or raced across the smooth plains. For where the land was tilled and enclosed, and the homesteads of men abounded, and their labours, there indeed were roads ; but oftentimes he traversed wide territories where was no chariot-track and no sign-post save the distant hills, nor fences, nor tillers of the soil ; only great herds of cattle feeding, and slaves on horseback who guarded them, and drave them this way and that. These indeed, with their dumb care, looked up astonished when they heard the distant din, for, like the ringing of many swathes of iron rods, car-borne on lonely ways in the still night, was the ringing of Cuculain's warlike equipment about Laeg as he swiftly traversed Ulla's plains.

Across the Calan he rushed, while the foaming spray flew high above the trampling steeds, and along the reedy shores of Muckno, where, in the

oak-groves, herds of many swine under their keepers, batted on the root of the wild parsnip. Between the echoing woods and the gleaming lake, in sunshine and shadow, Laeg thundered. Out on the quiet mere, fishermen let fall their half-drawn nets and sprang to their oars at the noise of his journeying.

One moment on the crest of the Boar's Ridge Laeg mightily restrained his rearing steeds, standing erect in the car, with wide-dispread feet, while with eagle-bright eyes he scanned the horizon round.

Far away on the left glittered the White Cairn of Slieve Fuad ; far away in front the plains of Murthemney rolled green to the Ictian sea. Eastward, too, Laeg saw the dark highland of Fochaine and—like a silver thread—the bright way where, from his fountains, Avon-Dia sought the sea. Out of the cloudless west the hot sun watched him. Sabh Ioldana, thou wert there ! The shadows of the gigantic steeds stretched wavering down the eastern slope of the Droum. Upon the chain-reins now he relaxed his great hands and loosed the rearing and reluctant steeds, then thundered down the flank of Droum-na-Torc.

With the sinking sun Laeg saw that Shanglan

laboured as he went ; and no longer, indeed, would anyone call him raven-black, for he was covered with white foam, and Laeg himself and the chariot were bespattered all over with the flakes which flew from his eager lips like snow. But the Liath Macha led on untired, and no one observing would say that he touched the ground ; noble still was his action and immense his stride and unwet his white flanks.

Laeg sprang from the chariot, and, holding the scourge between his teeth, he eased the yoke-strap around the neck of Black Shanglan and the jaw-strap of the head-stall, and leaped back, bounding lightly over the rim, and gave them rein once more.

But now again the son of Rianganbra groaned aloud and wrung his unavailing hands, for no longer did Black Shanglan travel unhurt, but stooped with every stride, for the fierce pace had injured his tender hoofs, unshod, for war-steeds were the steeds of Cuculain, and wide, smooth plains was their place. Moreover, the chariot, too, was injured, not designed by the builder for such an usage, and against many a rock and stone had Laeg dashed the wheels that day in his wild career. Then restrained he the steeds ; it was evening and the gloaming

of the day. As Laeg looked round he rejoiced, for not many roods in front there stood, as he deemed, the house of a noble. As he drew nigh, he recognised the person of the master, Cæl-shanig ; a northern kinsman, he of Cailitin, the mighty mage and enchanter of the East. His life at one time had been saved out of compassion by Cuculain. With him Laeg said that he would rest his wounded steed and repair the shaken war-car.

For while Cuculain was yet a boy at Dun Dalgan, bearing still his first name, Setanta, a galley which was accustomed to ply across the Muirnict to Moena Coning of the Britons returned towing behind a sorry wight, whom the crew had found in mid-channel, strapped down with strong ropes upon fir-trees joined together raft-wise ; and they saw in him a wretch for whose crimes the laws of the Gael did not suffer an eric to be accepted, but he was cast forth to the mercy of the waves as an evil and pernicious thing. Nevertheless, the boy Setanta had pity on him, because for three days and nights he had been tossed to and fro upon the currents of the Moyle and the Muirnict. With his own hands he chafed his wasted limbs and gave him restoring draughts, there on the rude pier where

the ships were wont to discharge their lading.

Now, according to the Fenechas, he to whose land such waifs might be borne in ships or by the sea was permitted to receive them into slavery, but Dectera did not think good to receive amongst her people a wretch cast forth out of his own country for some great crime, and she ordered her servants to return him to the waves of the Muirnict.

But the same night Setanta and Laeg withdrew the man and bore him outside the tuath. He was yet speechless, and his body blue and green from the strain of the ropes.

In the morning the boys came to the house of Brigamba, who excelled all the women of her time in wisdom and understanding: one of the seven noble women of the Gael. She was a judge and a counsellor amongst the Ultonians. To her care, then, the boys committed the miserable wight. So they returned rejoicing to Dun Dalgan, and endured the wrath of the daughter of Nessa.

CHAPTER XV

A PIONEER

I can make what merchandize I will,
I stand here for the law.

SHAKESPEARE.

THIS, then, was he to whose house Laeg approached, leading his wounded steed and shattered war-car; and Laeg marvelled when he saw the house, for it was well built and spacious, and other houses were around it for cattle and sheep and a strong bawn of earth and stone enclosed the whole. Moreover, he heard the hum of many querns and the clatter of hammers, and the cheerful noise of carpenters at their work. Also he saw where upon the hedges they had spread garments recently dyed, and he saw into the dye-house itself on the left side of the road, but the main house stood on the other. Hard by there were trim fences and young fruit-trees in enclosed plots, and all around the plain was strewn with fudir houses, and of bodacs,

but beyond was only untilled ground and forest.

And Laeg saw the master where he stood upon a fence by the roadside, beyond the house, and overlooked those who laboured beneath him in the field, lifting up a very fierce voice when any slackened in his labour. Laeg marvelled at this, seeing that the sun was already set.

Laeg drew nigh to the man, and, saluting him courteously, told how he journeyed to the relief of Cuculain, son of Sualtam, on the southern marches, and how he desired rest and food for his steeds and for himself, and the assistance of metal-workers to repair the chariot; but recalled not that matter of the Muirnict.

The man eyed Laeg narrowly, and moved towards the house meditating. Then said he:

“Why comest thou to me, O youth? I am not the bru-fir of the tuath, nor supplied with territory and tributes, with servants and house-room for the entertainment of travellers. That duty is his, and not many miles to the south and east is his house, where thou mayest freely demand entertainment for thy beasts and for thyself, and the assistance of his workers in metal. It was not by the lavish entertainment of those who passed by this way that I have become rich and great as thou now seest me, but

by prudence and attention to my several affairs. If I supply thee and thine with entertainment and the labour of my slaves, look to it, I shall require a fit recompense ! ”

Thereat the generous heart of Laeg was greatly enraged, and he answered :

“ A suitable reward thou shalt most assuredly receive, but bid now straightway a keeve of water to be prepared, that I may wash my steeds and my chariot, and see, too, that there is provender in the stable. Also provide a place for myself to rest in, and food, and, look you, tarry not.”

“ Not yet, O son of Rianganabra,” answered the other, “ but first thou shalt leave with me a pledge out of the rich armour and weapons which thou hast with thee in the car.”

“ The armour and the weapons are the warlike equipments of Cuculain, who is now in great jeopardy, and I hasten to his assistance. I cannot give to thee a pledge, but this I surely promise, that an abundant reward shall be thine for thy entertainment, if upon this so keenly hast thou set thy thoughts. Therefore, tarry not any longer, O bodach, but give instant orders to thy people, for my horses chill in the frosty air.”

So saying, Laeg stooped down and very attentively examined the hoofs of Black Shanglan, and afterwards the war-car in every part, paying no further heed to the man, who nevertheless talked continuously.

“Not by trusting in promises, O youth,” said he, “have I become what thou now seest me, but by compelling the performance of bonds contracted rightfully, according to the law. For when I reached this tuath, having been deported out of thine as though I had been smitten with the plague, I was first indeed the slave of Brigamba, wise and subtle, well skilled in the Bretha of Erin, both Cain law and Urdas, and those administered by the bru-fir in his forus, and I ushered before her those who sought counsel, and listened to her conversation and her judgments, and became myself well skilled in these things. Having served many months with much humility and carefulness, I prevailed upon her to give me portion of forest land upon the borders of her estate. She is the first woman in all Erin who has held land in her own right. For the male kindred of her father claimed the land against the disposition of the old man’s, and Brigamba herself pleaded her cause before the Ard-Brehon of the Court of the High King

at Emain Macha, and she prevailed so far as to retain a third of the lands of her father, but two-thirds went to the male kindred, and this is now the law amongst the Gael. Thus became Brigamba a lady of the land, a fair territory, extending from the forus of the bru-fir to the shores of the Oun-Gledia, southwards, and on the forest land of this she gave me taucra, land, and cows, and domestic utensils. Here then I built me a small sheeling, and grazed my cows, paying yearly the stipulated tribute, sending curds and butter for the maintenance of the household. Moreover, I performed other tasks for the people around me, hewing timber, and preparing fuel, and tending their cattle and their swine, and I gave loans for hire, and prospered.

“ All this time I was the slave and fudir of Brigamba, nor was I suffered to appear before the brehon of the tuath with my own complaints, but was represented by the lady of the soil, according to the law, and many times justice failed me, for she desired her Maor not to prefer my complaints before the brehon. Moreover, of all that I recovered a share went to her, and I was baulked in my rights. Then, too, I had no part or lot in the public land of the tuath.

“ Thereupon, with consent of Brigamba, I

took me three other fudirs like myself, and we entered into a contract joining our lands and rights, so that, being thus joined together, we became collectively free and entitled to all the privileges of a bo-aire, to elect the king, to enjoy participation in the public land, and to have full rights before the brehon and the bru-fir, and I was chief of this guild."

"Have done, O bodach," cried Laeg, "for time's foot will not rest for thy talking, and my horses chill."

"Nevertheless, O youth, hearken yet for a while." As he spoke he stretched forth a lean hand. "Then I purchased the rights of my fellow-guildsmen, and became a bo-aire and freeholder of tuath in my own right, and prospered year by year, rising from grade to grade, and Brigamba conferred on me much land, for my tributes I regularly paid. Also it is within my power to become a lord in the tuath were I so minded; but I care not for ostentation, nor do I delight in the companionship of the haughty nobles, but I attend to my affairs, and give the honour which is due to the blessed Shee. And now thou seest me as I am, having slaves, and artificers, and many bodacs and fudirs under me, whose houses and cultivated plots

thou mayest see scattered over the plain. But since I entered this tuath I have trusted in no promises which the bretha of Erin do not hold good, nor will I trust in thine, O son of Rian-gabra, for I know that though thou sittest at meat amongst the kings, at the table of Concobar Mac Nessa, yet art thou a no-man, or even a slave according to the laws of Ulla, and thy promise is only breath, and in like manner have I spoken ere this to those who are greater than thee. Therefore shalt thou give me a pledge out of thy possessions, or go to the house of the bru-fir, leading gently thy wounded steed, for very furious and reckless I doubt not has been thy driving. Therefore hie thee to the bru-fir."

"I am no slave, thou base churl, but a king's son, and the friend and attendant of the mightiest and noblest of the Gael. Methinks broad Ulla doth not contain within her borders one viler than thyself. Verily now for the last time shalt thou practise avarice, in this tuath, which thou has dishonoured, with thy exceeding vileness; for the noble Celtcar, the son of Uther, who loves well the son of the Sualtam, and myself also, will straightway drive thee out of thy possessions, who by marriage with the good and wise

Brigamba, is lord of this territory. Soon, with stripes upon thy avaricious shoulders, thou shalt carry thy vileness and thy cunning to another place."

Then Cælshanig laughed lightly, and said :

"Methinks, O youth, that thou wast reared amongst the Firbolgs or the Fomoroh, and not amongst the people of Ulla, for whom the ollavs have long since broken the violence of the lords, and their cruel exactions and oppressions. Celtcar, the son of Uther, is indeed lord of the soil, and a flaut in this tuath, but he is no lord of mine, nor do I owe submission and servility to any, save only to Brasal Mac Fiontann, who is the king. I care not for Celtcar, the son of Uther, nor do I tremble before his wrath, though well I know that he loves me not, nor doth the wise Brigamba, though she extended to me her protection and support. I am a bo-aire and free-man of this tuath, and no man shall hurt me or disturb me whose power does not extend to the destruction of the ancient laws and customs of the Gael. I am no fudir or base tenant of the son of Uther. My tributes and services are prescribed by the Fenechas, and may not be increased. For every ballybo of the land that I possess there proceeds yearly to the lord the

value of a cow, with a three-year-old ox and three in-calf heifers, with their feeding for a year, and not only may he not require more, but I myself am punishable by the law if I slavishly, or for any other reason, consent. My land is mine, and no lord shall hurt or remove me. Verily ere this have I seen the grasping lords of Ulla dispossessed of their lands on account of their oppressions, at Daul and Feis, when the kings meet in council with their brehons and wise ollavs. Therefore, I care not for that son of Uther, for over me he has no power, nor for his armed men, though he command in war thrice seven hundred warriors, the battalion of the Mor-Tuath. Nor speak to me concerning Cuculain and his martial necessities. I will not receive into my house wandering warriors, save that I receive a reward, and increase and not diminishing my substance. Therefore, O youth, hie thee on to the bru-fir, for with me thou shalt not abide, unless I receive from thy hands a goodly pledge."

Then answered Laeg in great wrath :—

" An evil time, indeed, will it be for the Gael if the ollavs and their wisdom concur to plant among us such shrubs of deadly poison as thyself, O vile and avaricious stranger, without

gratitude or nobleness or love for aught save thy miserable accumulation of sorry pelf. But this time, assuredly, thou shalt not be base with exultation, for out of thy possessions thou shalt afford food and shelter to the steeds of the noble Cuculain, and to myself also, and receive a severe chastisement at my hands."

Therewith, then the son of Rianganbra chastised him fiercely with a knotted scourge, so that Cælshanig fled howling from the highway, and passed through the bawn and the courtyard, and out into fields in which his slaves toiled, while Laeg pursued with many a stripe upon his bare limbs as he flew. He cried to his people for assistance, and they came together, but they feared to approach the fierce charioteer of Cuculain. Moreover, they loved not the man. Then Laeg seized him, and bore him weeping and protesting to the house. Now in the courtyard was a pile of ferns and rushes, which bullocks had drawn thither with ropes, and Laeg took therefrom a strong rope, and whipped him into a byre, and made him fast to the roof-tree, nor treated him with much gentleness. Then he hastened out, and gave orders to the slaves, and they obeyed him swiftly, for very wrathful was the son of Rianganbra,

and a bright colg of glittering bronze hung by his side.

After this Laeg led the steeds of Cuculain within the bawn, and released them from the chariot, and washed them carefully, and applied salves and lotions to the feet of the wounded steed. Then he stabled and bedded his horses, and bade the slaves pour abundantly barley two years old into their feeding troughs, and fill the mangers with fresh hay. Meantime the artificers in metal came about the chariot under the light of torches, and a loud din arose from the labours of the skilful craftsmen. When this work was ended, and the chariot was washed and dried and polished, they drew it within the chariot-house with all its warlike furniture, and Laeg shut-to the strong oaken doors and locked them, and returned to the house.

There, before a huge fire, the son of Rian-gabra feasted on the good things of the place, eating roast flesh, with boiled roots and butter and the white curd of milk, and drinking much ale. Without, in the byre, the miserable man wept in silence, for he feared lest the charioteer might slay him, being so impetuous. Nevertheless, he added up in his mind the corp-dira, and the eric, and the enechlan, for he was ever

a slave to avaricious thoughts. All the heavy fine he computed very accurately, though there were pains in his bones, and dire agony, and his limbs were bloodied and torn where the fierce charioteer had cut him with the knotted scourge. He grieved much now that he was not a flaut of the tuath, for then would the enechlan be much more abundant, for the insult offered to a noble might not be wiped out without an honour-price far heavier than was customary in the case of a plain freeman of the tuath, though his wealth might be great. And this was the reason why he had not attained the rank of a noble, for no possessor of soil how wealthy soe'er he might be, was entitled to be proclaimed a flaut of the tuath unless he had amongst those that held land under him ten tenants at least who should be free law, that is to say, for each portion of land capable of feeding twenty-one cows, the tributes which the man correctly enumerated as the due out of every townland to the lord of the soil. Therefore, Cælshanig established around him only fudirs and bodacs, whose tributes were not under the protection of the law, by which means he became wealthy indeed, but continued ignoble, not having a generous mind, which thing—namely, that he had not

taken out his flautship in the tuath, now grieved him in his computations. Moreover, in his churlishness he was not wise, for he knew not the usages of war, and the suspension of the strict law in the imminence of danger, and the necessities of brave warriors, by whose prowess alone might all law be sustained ; therefore, even in his avaricious mind, he was not wise.

Now Laeg regarded him not at all, but lay down, stretching his mighty limbs on a couch beside the fire, for it was cold, and his great heart was somewhat appeased, only he was troubled and fretful concerning his dear master. For this reason he could not sleep, but tossed restlessly from side to side, and sometimes he sat up and then again lay down, being troubled in his affectionate heart, for besides thinking upon his master, his mind also was irritated from the conversation of Cælshanig, and from contact with that grinding and avaricious soul, which exhibited neither courtesy to himself nor reverence for Cuculain, of whom he ever was accustomed only to hear praise. Therefore he could not sleep, but turned restlessly from side to side. At last he rose and went out, and, awaking the slaves, inquired concerning the

bard, who in those days was always attached to a wealthy house.

Now Cælshanig delighted not at all in the society of bards and harpers, and he was accustomed to revile that sacred order, saying that he would rather see a weed in his field than a poet in his house. Therefore was there a bitter enmity between the Crithneean and the singing men, who delighted to repeat satiric ranns concerning Cælshanig, and to furnish amusement thereby to those who were not pleased at his great prosperity. Nevertheless, he had in his service a druid who interpreted for him dreams and omens, and the notes of wrens and ravens, and who taught him the observances which were due to the Shee, that they might be favourable to him in his affairs, and this druid brought to his hearth annually the sacred fire which was kindled upon the Druid's Hill at Usna of the great congregations, and he himself sent regularly thither the dues of the college of druids of Usna—to wit, a fat swine and a sack of corn, or their equivalents, according to the custom of the times, and he obeyed implicitly the advice of the druid, and to him alone he was generous, and he stood greatly in awe of his reproof, and would gape around him in his druidic obser-

vances, though to his dependents and others he was accustomed to be overbearing and contemptuous.

Hearing this, Laeg bade the slaves to summon to him whatever bard dwelt nearest, bidding them tell the bard who it was desired his society, Laeg, son of Rianganbra, the esquire and charioteer of Cuculain. The slaves set forth joyfully upon that quest. In the meantime Laeg busied himself about the steeds, for their welfare was ever the nighest to his mind, and after that he returned to the house. Ere long the slaves returned, bringing with them Anabind, a skilful harper, whose liss was by the roadside further to the south, and he was a descendant of Cir, who followed Heber and Heremon out of Espan, and delighted the children of Milith in the palace of Heremon, at Arget-Ros, upon the Nore. Having his harp strapped upon his shoulder, Anabind came to the liss, and from its place in the wall he took the door-staff and smote upon the door; the charioteer opened it and stood huge in the narrow entrance, and received the sacred bard joyfully. Then he drew forth more ale in a great vessel, ashen, with a border of white findruiney, and distributed to the bard and to himself.

Meantime the harper tuned his harp, and Laeg

sat down, gazing into the red embers, holding his auburn head between his great hands ; outside in the bawn the slaves pressed close against the wattled walls, listening to the heart-subduing lays. Then for Laeg the bard sang tales of ancient heroes, of elopements and courtships, of battles and nocturnal assaults, and of the conflagration of noble duns, touching the harp as he chanted, with a musical voice, well modulated, for he was carefully trained, and had studied his art for many years in the south, where they excelled in recitation and the management of the voice. His own soul, too, was sweet and noble so that he felt the power of the things concerning which he sang, and Laeg nodded with his head, keeping time to the measure of the chant.

While the bard still sang the morning dawned, stealing in through the narrow windows, and Laeg took from his arm a bracelet of gold, and gave it to the bard.

Then Laeg went forth quickly and harnessed his horses, and yoked his chariot, and fared southwards. He passed the house of the bru-fir and entered on a wide plain, which was the public land of that tuath. The house of the bru-fir was on the edge of the plain, and many houses surrounded it, and the authority of the

bru-fir was over these. His Forus, too, was opened, and he sat and adjudicated, though the sun had but just risen. All matters relating to the public land were brought before him, and questions relating to trespass, and the maintenance of fences, and roads, and small differences arising between man and man. Moreover, in his Forus was the king of the tuath inaugurated, and the tanist, and here was to adopt the laws decided on by the king and the tuath to elect the officers of that small realm, and held the tocomrah of all the free citizens of the saba of his lords and ollavs.

But the arbitrament of the wise bru-fir was not now a care to Laeg nor the hospitality of that house where preparation was made each day for the entertainment of strangers, and he fared forward swiftly across that plain, and dashed through the Oun Glieda, and never tarried ; and it was evening when he came in sight of the Avon Dia. Ere he reached the ford, the Liath Macha pulled violently to the left, and with difficulty did Laeg restrain him, and drave on to the ford. When he came to the river he saw the splintered weapons and the trampled shores, and he saw blood upon the stones, and the great pebbles that had been displaced by Cuculain,

and he drave through the ford, and across the smooth plain. When he saw the camp of Meave, south westward, he wheeled round the steeds and returned to the ford. About a stone's cast from the ford there was a woman weeping over a new-made grave. Laeg approached her, and inquired concerning the marks of combat there. The woman looked up between her tears and torn dishevelled hair, and said :—

“ There many brave warriors of the host of Meave have been slain by the invincible Cuculain, whose right hand that slew Far-Cu, would that the wolves of the land were devouring this night. To-day he hath slain Fardia, son of Daman, of the Firbolgs, and men say that he will not survive until the morrow, but will perish alone in his bloody lair. O sun and strong wind, slay him without pity ! ”

Laeg trembled when he heard the voice of the woman and saw her countenance disfigured with revenge and sorrow, for she was young and not uncomely, and he gave rein to the Liath Macha, endlessly straining forward, having a thought in his eager mind, and crossed again the Avon Dia, and under the guidance of the divine steed, he was borne through the dark alleys of the forest, by many winding and devious ways,

bordered with trees and dense, impenetrable scrub, a labyrinthine maze, and at length he heard the whinnying of horses, to which the war-steeds responded, making an echo in the hollow forest, and on a sudden, lo ! a grassy glade open to the stars, and there the yellow steeds of Emer, Wave Mane, and White Star, and a young man standing between them with drooped head and his arms around the neck of the horses.

Laeg sprang from the chariot, and ran towards him, for he recognised the form of Cuculain, calling him by his own name, Setanta. But there was no answer from Cuculain, and no smile upon his lips. At first he was affrighted, but after that looked sorrowfully without recognition upon Laeg with wild eyes full of suffering. Laeg uttered a loud and bitter cry, and fell upon the ground, and tore his auburn hair, and he remained at the feet of Cuculain weeping for a long time, grovelling low upon the ground ; and the divine steeds, too, of Cuculain were distressed bowing their splendid heads, and the long mane of the Liath Macha flowed upon the ground. After that Laeg arose, still weeping and let down the war-car, spreading rugs and skins, and washed and bound up his wounds, and took from the chariot clean linen, and made a bed for

Cuculain, and Cuculain obeyed him in all things like a young child, being very gentle and submissive, and Laeg took the head of Cuculain and held it in his breast, the head that all Erin could not abase or dishonour and wept anew over his dear lord.

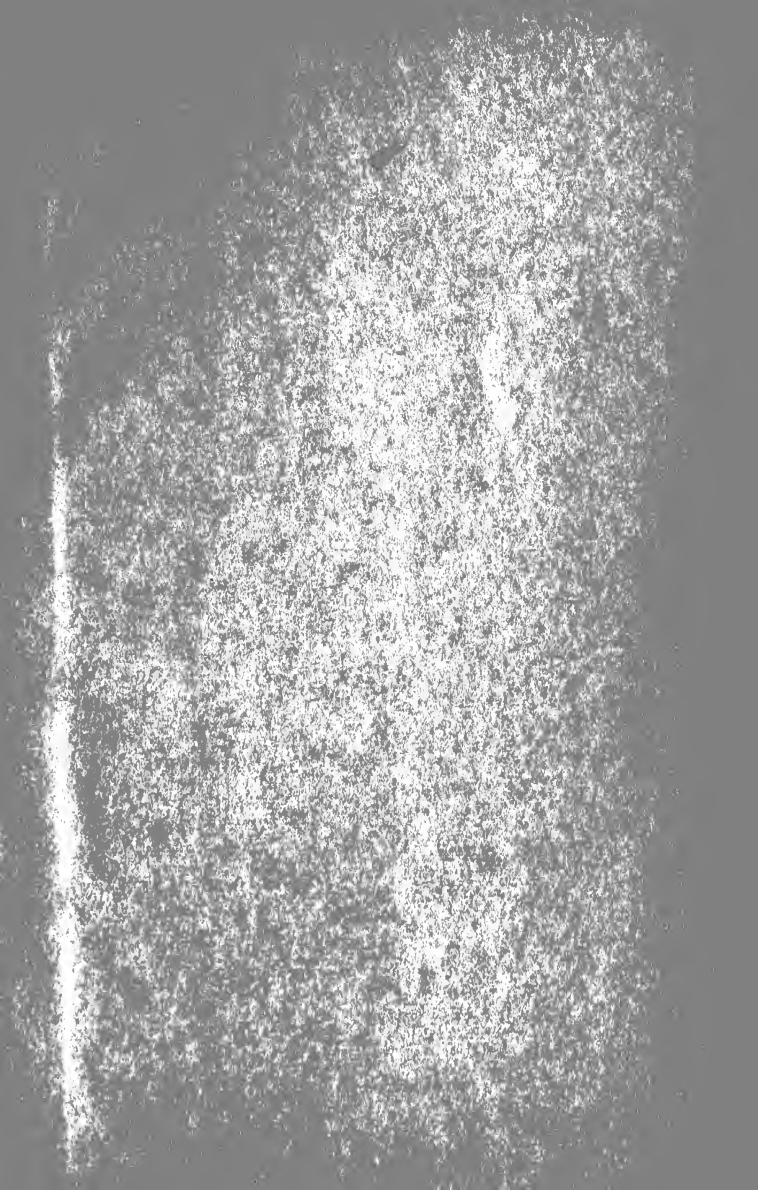
Three days and three nights wept Laeg beside his couch, hearing afar the noise of Meave's host wasting Murthemney; and ever between his tears he spake to Cuculain of old boyish days, when they were together at Dun Dalgan, and of that raid upon the Bregians, when they carried off the daughter of Manah, the haughty bru-fir, and of the honour in which he was held by the Red Branch, soothing in every way his troubled spirit, hoping that somewhere through the clouds of suffering some ray of light and hope might penetrate to warm and illumine his dark spirit. On the third day, at even, Cuculain sat up and looked at Laeg, and put his two hands upon his shoulders, and kissed him; and the Liath Macha came near, and Cuculain smiled and stroked his face. And the same evening Laeg heard voices, and felt strange presences around the son of Sualtam, and retreated into the shadows of the forest, cowering amongst the trees. For a swift word had traversed all

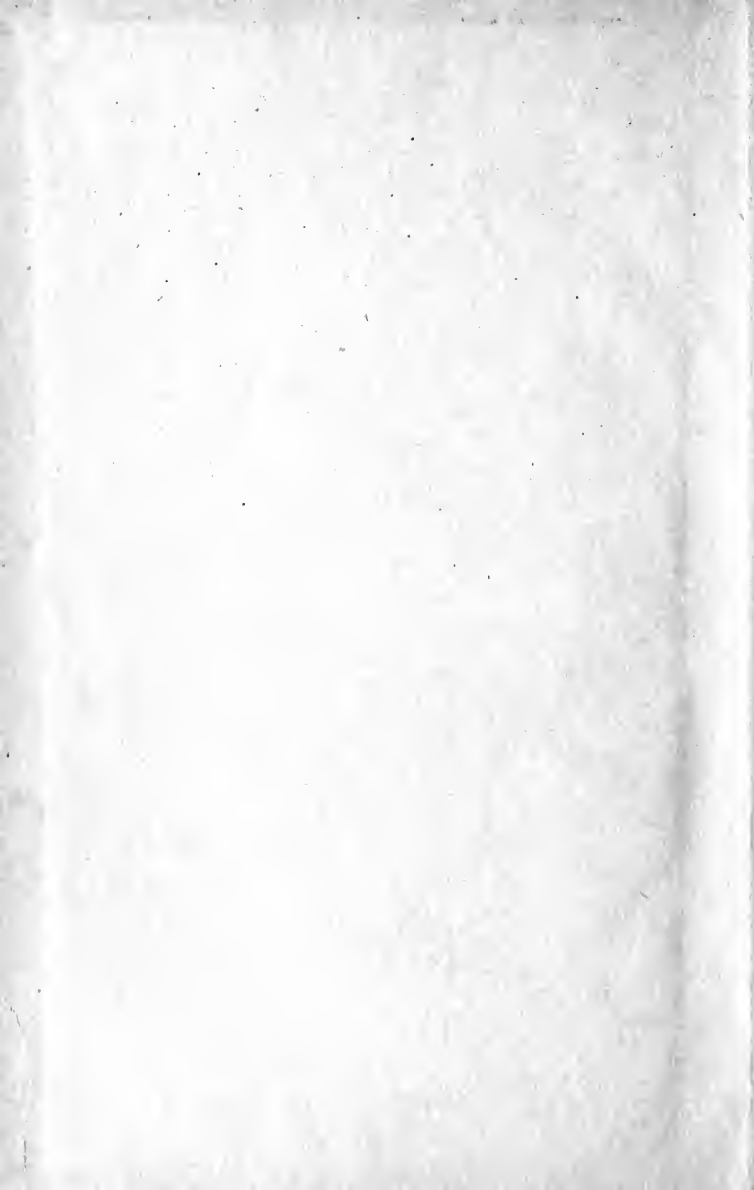
Erin, coming upon the pure blasts of the wind to every fairy rath and glen and sacred hill, and the ancient plains of tomb and temple and with one accord the happy Shee came forth out of Fairyland, out of Tir-na-n-ogue, where they live in bliss, consuming the "feast of age." From Usna, and Tlatga, and Tailteen; from Cruhane, and Tara, and Awlin; from Gowra, Knock Ainey, Dunamarc, and Bru-Liah; Adair and Lahran, and Oileen Arda Nemed; from Brunna-Boy-na, and Tu-Inver, and Fionnahah, of Slieve Fuad, Slieve Blahma of the Lahyees, and Slieve-na-man Fionn of the Osree; came the Shee of the ancient Fomoroh out of the west, and the Shee of the Firbolgs; came Ceasair, the hoary queen, paling, melting into the air before the growing glory of the Tuatha De Danan; even she, though smit to death, wan and faded as the moon struck by the beams of the rising sun, came with her waning sovereignty to comfort the guileless Cuculain.

From the Shannon, where the hills are dark above the waters of the Red Lake, came Bove Derg, endlessly grieving for his grandchildren, the cruelly transformed. They indeed came not, for the cold waters of the Moyle detained them, where they wandered swanlike—Æd and

Fiechra and comely Conn, and Finoola, their sister, maternal though so young. They themselves came not, but from the north out of the sea arose a slow, sweet fairy music, most heart-piercing, causing tears. Came Lir of the Shee Fionaha, on Slieve Fuad, whose were the sweet children. His dominion was over the sea, and he lorded it over the lawless sea. Came Mananan, the son of Lir, eastward in the Muir-nict, traversing the soft waves in his chariot drawn by fairy steeds. It brake not a bubble or severed a wave-crest. Came the warrior queen of the Gael, Badb, and Macha, and Moor-ega, relaxing their stern brows above the couch of Cuculain, and the three sweet sisters, Eire and Fohla and Banba, whose gentle names are upon Inis Fail. They met and welcomed the children of Milith, what time having consumed their ships they marched inland to subdue the island. Came Brihid, adored by the bards, and Angus of the Brugh, dazzling bright, round whom flew singing-birds, purple-plumed, and no eye sees them, for they sing in the hearts of youths and maidens. Came Goibnen, the father of craftsmen, and Eocha Mac Erc, surnamed Ollav Fohla, and the Dagda Mor, who ruled over all the Tuatha De Danan, from his green

throne above the waters of the Boyne. Came Ogma, the inventor of letters, and Coirpri Kin Kæth, surnamed Crom and Cruag, "the stooping one," and "the stern," whose altar was upon Moy Slect when the Talkend, cross-bearing, with his clerics, came to Inis Fail. All the blessed Shee throughout Erin came that night to honour the Hound of Murthemney, and Cuculain saw them all, plainly, face to face, as man speaking with his friend, benign countenances and venerable, high hearts made pure and noble by death, out of Fairy Land, where they dwell in bliss, inspiring and correcting the minds of the Gael. As when to a child weeping in the night, his parents appear with soothing hands and words so that night around the mighty Cuculain appeared the blessed Shee, speaking words of comfort and of praise, and Cuculain conversed with the Tuatha De Danan, being noble of heart like themselves. And Laeg saw them not, but he felt the awful presence, and crouched deeper into the shadows, veiling his eyes with his hands, for he feared lest he should be smitten with blindness or struck suddenly dead, seeing with his eyes the blessed Shee. After that, Cuculain fell into a deep sleep, without a dream, that lasted for the space of a day and a night.





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